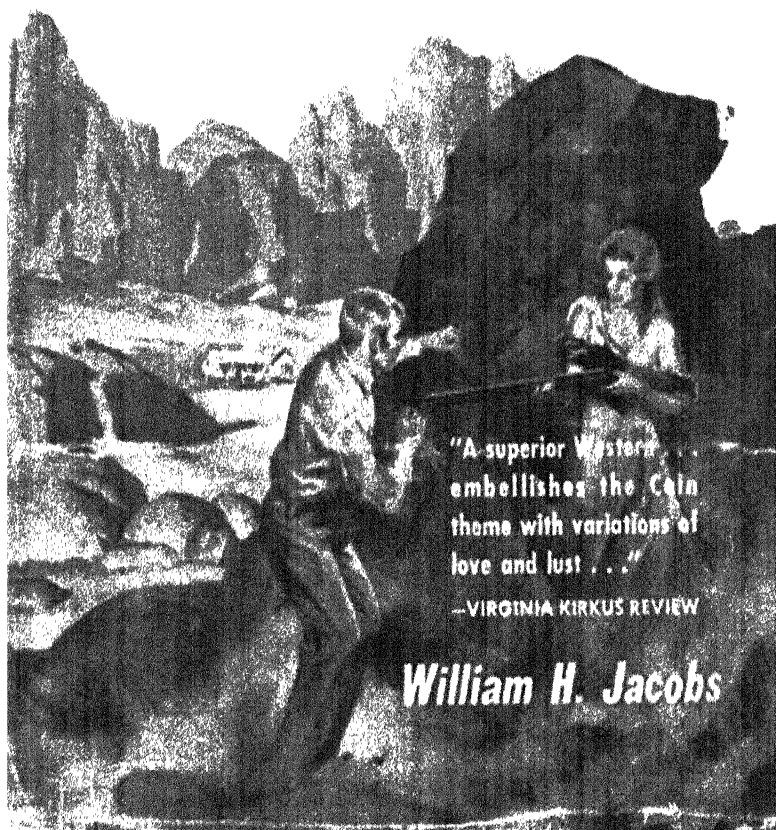




# **PAGES MISSING IN THE BOOK**

# THIS VIOLENT LAND



"A superior Western . . .  
embellishes the Cain  
theme with variations of  
love and lust . . ."

—VIRGINIA KIRKUS REVIEW

*William H. Jacobs*

1954

## VIOLENT

## LAND

by William H. Jacobs

THIS IS A NOVEL of the West as it really was—and is still remembered—in its most violent, yet most glorious era: The legend-packed West of Tombstone and Dodge City . . . The frontier West of Texas cattlemen and Wyoming pioneers . . . The outlaw West of fabulous Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. . . .

Yet this is no ordinary tale of legend and nostalgic romance—though these are here, inevitably. . . . It is a realistic novel of trigger-taut, leather-swift drama—the kind of drama that could only have happened in the West of the wild 1880's.

It is the story of a plainsman's savage revenge on his own delinquent father—and its bitter, unexpected consequences. . . . Of desperate flight and furious pursuit—the pursuit not merely of brother by brother, but of each by the inner furies that plague every guilty human heart. . . . It is a story of tangled emotional relationships—of a warm-blooded frontier woman, promised to a “good” man, but bound by the urgencies of the flesh to a merciless killer. . . . Of a family crime as modern as Freud and as ancient as Greek tragedy—and of a retribution that could only come to pass in the violent folkways of the American West.

This novel is told with a rugged simplicity and spell-building tension that lend it an almost epic quality. Here is the realistic record of a hardy people in the act of taming a harsh yet beautiful land—their love of the country and hatred of its violence, their bright hopes and darker lusts, their touching triumphs and heart-crushing disillusionments. Some of these people are:

**TRAVIS MALABAR**—Bowie's younger brother, a man without a gun, who is shamed into setting

*(Continued on back flap)*





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*This Violent Land*



A NOVEL BY *William H. Jacobs*

**THIS  
VIOLENT  
LAND**

*New York*

*Frederick Fell, Inc., Publishers*

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PART ONE

**A SEEKER**



# I

THE MAN sat very still on his black horse in the small shade of the pink, bald-faced rocks. Half-concealed in a shallow draw at the bottom of the long grade, and far enough off the hard-rutted dirt road to avoid most of the dust now, he was still able to observe all riders and wagons coming west out of the town of Tombstone.

Despite the shade, the early afternoon sun sprouted great beads of sweat along his forehead, furrowing them sluggishly down through the dust and heavy beard of his face. His long slim hands, crossed on the pommel of his saddle, glistened with salt and running grime. When the fat black flies settled on his fingers and on the back of his neck he didn't stir. He hulked loosely in the saddle with his head inclined as if asleep. But he was not asleep.

There was no movement on the Tombstone-Charleston road now. There was no movement at all, except for the swishing of the black horse's tail and an occasional sidewise stare by the horse at Emmett Graham's two blue-nosed mules.

Perched high on his wagon loaded with a new-boxed sewing machine, sacks of beans, flour, coffee, a barrel of bacon, and other provisions for his family, Emmett Graham watched the tall man alongside him out of the corner of his eye. He was careful not to look directly at him and

he was careful not to make any quick, unusual movements. When the man finally daubed the sweat off his face Emmett Graham lifted his hands slowly to his neckerchief and rubbed his face quietly and methodically.

Then he said, "Watch?" He said it limply just like he'd said, "Tobacco?" a short time ago when he'd wanted to take the fixings out of his shirt pocket and roll up. Now again he said a little louder, "Watch?"

The man astride the black horse nodded without looking up.

Emmett Graham reached down into his watch pocket and pulled out his old tarnished silver piece. "Five past three," he said, loud enough for any decent man to hear.

There was no response at all from the other man.

"It'll be long past dark 'fore I git home," Emmett Graham complained nervously. "Wife and kids will git plenty worried. That's fer sure."

There was still no indication the other man had heard him.

"When I git to Charleston I've still got several miles to go down the San Pedro River to git home. Rough country. Injun country." Emmett Graham spoke it quickly, hopefully. The man on the black horse merely shook his head.

Emmett Graham licked his thin, chapped lips. "Ain't no sense to this," Emmett Graham said, but he did not say it loudly. He leaned back in the wagon and folded his arms. He had been sitting here, waiting with this man, waiting for he knew not what, for over two hours now. Lying within easy reach on the wooden floor boards of the wagon was his Winchester rifle, yet Emmett Graham made no move toward it.

He had made his play twice. He had lost twice. It was enough for any man. More than enough, he tried to reassure himself.

The first time, early this afternoon, the man on the black horse had reined out onto the road with his hand upraised and Emmett Graham, highballing down Pick-'em-up Grade anxious to get home with the sewing machine for his wife, had been forced to brake his team hard and pull off the side of the road into the sand to avoid hitting him.

"What the hell—!" Emmett Graham had started then.

"I need a man," the other had said.

"You trying to git yourself kilt? Riding out like that!"

"I need a man for a little while." The other had studied him carefully, through half-narrowed eyes, from the tips of his boots to the crown of his hat.

"I got a long ways to go home," Emmett Graham said. "Got a full load of vittles here. What fer you need a man?"

"Reckon you'll do."

"Do fer what?"

"Follow me!"

"Follow you! Follow you where? Listen, mister, I ain't following no one noplase 'less I know what fer," and Emmett Graham reached quickly for the Winchester at his feet. When he came up with it he was looking at a Colt .45, hammer back, pointed straight at his belly.

"I reckon you'll follow me."

Emmett Graham lowered his rifle. Slowly. He dropped it back on the floor at his feet. He then stared openly at this man—this tall man, very tall, with the curly-brimmed, dark, short-crowned hat, light blue, long-sleeved shirt with unbuttoned leather vest, blue neckerchief, dark denim pants shoved into boots with a star at the top such as Emmett Graham had seen in Tombstone affected by cowhands from Texas. He was packing twin Colt .45's in open holsters, belted, tied down low on his legs; there was a Winchester in the rifle boot on the right side of the double-

rigged Texas saddle, a shotgun slung from a thong on the pommel on the left side of the saddle, and an extra cartridge belt of ammunition swung around the saddle horn. His bedroll and slicker were tied behind the cantle and he carried a long knife in a sheath off his left hip.

He was a rolling arsenal of iron and lead such as Emmett Graham had rarely seen, even in this hard-case infested territory of Arizona.

The big black gelding he was riding had been some horse once, too. Small alert ears. Well-poised front. Short, deep barrel. But it was ganted up now, larded with salt, sweat and dust like its rider. It had been ridden hard and long and from a great distance, Emmett Graham estimated, by a man in a hurry to get somewhere—safely. And by a man who didn't care much about his horse, judging by the saddle galls that rifle and shotgun had probably worn into him by now. Yet the man was wearing big sunflower spurs and they'd been filed dull. And there wasn't a mark on the horse's ganted flanks. It don't make sense, Emmett Graham thought. None at all.

"I reckon you'll follow me!" the man repeated, the limberness gone out of his tone. His eyes were a pale washed-out blue, the color of this sun-singed cloudless sky, his face charred with beard and dust but not too dark to conceal the ugly welted band of flesh along his forehead and down the side of his cheek. That face somehow reminded Emmett Graham of the broken scarred crags of the Dragoon Mountains that rimmed this desert valley.

"I reckon," Emmett Graham said then.

Emmett Graham had made his second play almost an hour ago. The man on the black horse had been in the same position he was in now, and Emmett Graham had thought him to be dozing. Slowly, ever so slowly, he had dropped his hands along his side, along his pants, then free, snail-like, toward the wagon bed and the rifle. He never

carried a belted pistol like most folks around these parts. He had always figured he could handle a Winchester as well as most men could handle a pistol and he'd always figured he'd never get himself in a position where he'd have to use a belted gun. He almost wished he'd been carrying one this time, though. Almost.

It took him five minutes in excruciatingly slow stages to get his hands from his waist to his rifle. He made no sound, and there was no traffic along the road to disturb the other man. He did not take his eyes off the man on the horse until his fingers touched the bed of the wagon. Then he took one brief glimpse at the rifle to direct his hands to the butt and trigger guard. His fingers tightened on the rifle ready to come up with it. He glanced back at the man on the black horse. His head was lowered as before, his left hand was on the saddle horn as before. In his right hand resting across his left forearm was a .45.

Emmett Graham had no idea how it got there. If there was any movement it had been in that fraction of a second when his own eyes were averted. It was much too fast for him.

Emmett Graham dropped the rifle. The other man shook his head slowly. "I don't usually misjudge a man," he said. "Don't ever do that again!"

The worst thing about this, and the thing that bothered Emmett Graham the most, even more than what this fellow intended doing—because Emmett Graham had the feeling now that whatever was to occur would not occur to him, at least if he did not force it—was why this man had selected him out of all other travelers along this widely traveled nine-mile stretch of road between Tombstone and Charleston. Why him?

Suddenly, Emmett Graham didn't like the question, didn't like to think about it even. He slipped his fingers along his dry, cracked lips. He thought of the sewing

machine back there on the wagon bed packed securely between the flour and pinto beans. For a moment that made him feel better. It was a surprise for his wife. It would be the first sewing machine she'd ever had. It had cost more money than he could really afford. But she deserved it. She'd never ever had anything nice. It was a hard life out here in this country with two growing boys to feed and clothe.

But was that the reason he'd bought it, when he couldn't afford it? He hadn't really known why he wanted to buy her the machine until he bought it. Then he knew. What were those ten-gallon words that old ganted-up preacher used last Sunday in the little adobe church in Charleston? "Bring your sin offerings, brethren, and your burnt offerings, as the Lord commanded, and make an atonement for thyself and for the people." Well, that's what he was doing with that sewing machine. Because he wasn't proud of a certain decision he'd reached, it was to be his "sin offering"—"shame offering," rather.

Too many strange, hard-eyed men, like this one alongside him now, had ridden through the sand and grass into this San Pedro Valley in the last three years. That was why his two friends, Joe Gormand and Leland Wright, were dead. He was sure of that. With ten mouths to feed between them they had gone back into the Huachuca Mountains looking for their lost cattle. They had been well armed. Joe Gormand was found dead, six bullets in his belly. Half of Leland Wright's stubborn head had been shot off. "Apaches," the neighboring Clantons said. "Those dirty, murdering Apaches."

But everyone knew who had really killed Joe and Leland. The small ranchers were organizing. It was organize or fall one by one. The marauding Indians were trouble enough in this valley, but when your own kind, like the



Clantons and the McLowrys, went bad on you, it was too much. But Joe Gormand was dead, and Leland Wright too. The smoke signals were up. The Ranchers Committee was coming to see Emmett Graham tomorrow to get him to join them in going back into the Huachucas to find their cattle, and find who stole them. Punish them. Hang them. Every man was needed for this effort.

He wasn't going. True, he'd lost three milk cows and he had no more milk to sell to the Chinese restaurants in Charleston. And a part of his fence had been torn down and a big herd of Clanton cattle driven to water through the southern end of his potato and barley field when they could just as well have gone around.

But Joe Gormand was dead, and Leland Wright. Two of his best friends. One in the belly, one in the head. The markers were out.

He wasn't going into those black hills, he had decided. He would rather live small than die big. He wasn't proud of the decision and so he had bought a sewing machine. But now, thinking of that sewing machine no longer made him feel any better. It had brought him back full circle to this man. Why had the man chosen him? Why? Perhaps, Emmett Graham chafed, it's all part of the same thing. It was a thought singularly without pleasure.

Well, he had made his play twice. The second time he could easily have been killed. That would have been damned foolishness, getting killed over something he didn't understand. He would just wait. It was all he could do, he apologized to himself.

Far off on the other side of Pick-'em-up Grade Emmett Graham could hear the creaking of an ore wagon mounting the slope. The faint tinkling of the mules' hames drifted down to them. Then he could see it, a blur of small indistinguishable dots cresting the tip of the grade.

The man on the black horse reached into his saddlebag and removed a pair of worn binoculars. He focused on the sharp pitch of the dusty grade.

Emmett Graham smiled contemptuously. The man was a real stranger to these parts, all right. Everyone hereabouts knew the sound of those silver ore wagons. You could tell one three miles away. One thing Emmett Graham would bet on, whoever this man was looking for was no mule skinner.

After a moment the man put his glasses down.

Twenty-four mules pulling three wagons bulging with ten tons of silver ore roared down the slope headed for Charleston and the stamp mill on the bend of the river. A tornado of dust spiraled out behind them. The mule skinner riding the jerk line on the near wheeler was lost in the dust and only his vice could be heard, a rasping, grating, razor edge of a voice, "Hee-aw, hee-aw! Goddamn ya! Yaw! Yaw!" On the shallow upside of the grade his long black whip flicked through the dust and scorched the withers of a big white mule. "Yaw!" He lashed out at the lagging white mule again.

The back of the man on the black horse grew rigid. "You sonofabitch," he swore softly through gritted teeth each time the whip struck the laboring white. He said nothing when the skinner peeled flesh on the roans and grays.

The Benson stage rattled down the long slope now, following the mule skinner's dust at a very respectable distance; then came a wagon loaded high with foodstuffs driven by an old rancher and his woman; next a lone rider at a steady lope, then a man in an empty buckboard; another ore wagon—the stranger focused his glasses on all of them as they made their way down the grade.

Approaching the grade from the other direction, from Charleston toward Tombstone, a bullwhacker forked his

whip at his oxen, hauling timber out of the Huachuca Mountains. A dripping water wagon, and several empty ore wagons trailed the bullwhacker. The man on the black horse did not look at any of these.

The sun lowered in the west, casting a deep blue shadow over the Huachucas, setting adrift mirage lakes of mist in the old, red foothills and over the sandy, summer-shriveled earth just below them. To the north and east, thirty miles distant, the scalloped Dragoons gleamed blood-red in the full face of this sun.

Emmett Graham wiped his face again. His armpits were running, his crotch too. He was tired, itchy and uncomfortable. It was a strain sitting here like this without moving around, waiting without knowing for what.

"Water?" he said mildly.

Almost imperceptibly the tall man jerked his head.

Emmett Graham reached under his wagon and lifted up a canteen hung from a nail there. He drank greedily. For an instant he wondered if he should offer the canteen to the other man. He didn't want to, but if he didn't offer him a drink the man might take offense.

The man with the welted face watched him drink. Reluctantly Emmett Graham lowered the canteen. He regretted now having asked for a drink. He started to screw the lid on, and stopped. He belched with the warm, metallic water, buying a moment. Halfheartedly he held out the canteen.

The tall man accepted it and drank slowly. Water dribbled onto his blue denim shirt, darkening the white salt streaks. He lidded the canteen and handed it back. "Thanks," was all he said. It was more than Emmett Graham expected.

A single wagon drawn by a team of gray horses breasted the rise of Pick-'em-up Grade. The man on the black horse leveled the glasses on the wagon. He held the driver

for a long time. At last he lowered the binoculars and placed them back in the saddlebag, not taking his eyes off the wagon descending the grade. Slowly he raised his left hand. Fingers outstretched, he laid the back of his wrist up right against his mouth so the dark hairs pressed against his lips. It was an odd gesture, Emmett Graham thought, almost a gesture of indecision or doubt. Yet there seemed nothing doubtful or indecisive about this man.

After a moment the man clenched his fingers. He lowered his hand. "Give me your rifle," he said to Emmett Graham in his low, flat voice.

Emmett Graham handed him the rifle, butt first. The man reined his black around a barrel cactus in the shallow draw and moved out toward the road. He set the rifle in the thorny branches of a mesquite.

"You'll get it back," he called over his shoulder. "Just stay where you are."

"I wouldn't use it on you," said Emmett Graham.

The tall man turned to stare at him. He had the strangest eyes Emmett Graham had ever seen. Not hard, not soft—just nothing. Like smoked blue porcelain. Eyes without waver. Emmett Graham dropped his own eyes away from the terrible steadiness.

"I didn't think you would," the tall man said. "Just set there now. Hear?" He gently spurred his horse out onto the road.

Emmett Graham felt the blood spooking up his sweating back. One thing, the waiting was all over. Quickly he reached over his shoulder and scratched himself vigorously.

It was all downhill now and the grays wanted to run. William Alonzo Malabar wanted to run, too. He'd had five solid drinks of good rye whiskey before leaving Tombstone and one more at the Screaming Willies saloon

at the top of Pick-'em-up Grade. Because he'd taken those drinks and talked a bit too much between them he'd probably not get back to the ranch till after dark. He didn't care. The whiskey made a comfortable, solid wedge inside his stomach. He needed that wedge. He'd needed it for some time now. Since Cornelia had passed away last month, just one week before his fifty-fifth birthday, it took that extra jolt at the Screaming Willies to get him properly fortified. That sixth one was for the owl. With the whiskey inside he could even smile about it.

Cornelia had been right. In the winter she had coughed and said she would never see his birthday again, nor hers either. "I heard the owl hoot, William," she'd said, and there was no owl. In the spring when the land was fresh and warm, she had coughed harder and said the same thing. He had joked with her over this obsession and told her she had lived around the Pimas in Tucson so long she was getting to act and think like an Indian. But Cornelia was right. She *had* heard the owl hoot.

Sometimes now, William Malabar thought, he too could hear the owl hoot.

William Alonzo Malabar held his two grays back, his single holstered Colt shifting upward uncomfortably on his thigh as the wagon braked. He had a month's supply of food on the wagon and a wedding present for Travis and the Wade woman. He didn't want to turn it over again as he'd done the last time he'd come whooping down this grade and tried to take the Charleston curve too fast. There'd been beans and flour dripping from every mesquite tree clear down to the river.

What with the money it had taken to bury Cornelia and buy a decent headstone, and the money he had put in those peaches along Barbacomori Creek at the foot of the Huachucas, and what with Travis fixing to get married next week, he sure wasn't so rich that he could afford to

feed this desert like that more than once a year. It made him chuckle remembering as he tight-reined the grays through the heat haze, descending the hard clay and gravel of Pick-'em-up Grade, and pushed his gun deeper into its holster.

It sure don't take much to get a man setting right again, he was thinking to himself, the whiskey in his belly beginning to warm and fuzz the old visions in his head.

He made a picture of peach trees. Peaches, peaches, and more peaches, growing where peach trees had never grown before. Through the sun and dust he made another picture, an older picture. He was on his way home, at long last, back to Salem, and they were all at the station waiting for him—his brother Sam, tall as a clipper mast, handsome in his black captain's uniform and gold braid, setter of sailing records; his sisters Mathilde and Chardine, elegant in their rustling silks, with their fat, cigared, merchant husbands. He was unlatching his huge swollen carpetbag. It burst open with red and yellow balls of fire spilling out onto the station platform and he was saying, in his pearl-gray suit and high silk hat, "I'm home, Sam. Home at last. Can't stay long though." They were all scrambling for the peaches. "Yes, Mathilde," he was saying, "I guess I'm the first and largest commercial grower of peaches out west. Yes, Chardine, I'm glad I didn't go to sea like Sam. Yes, Sam, help yourself to those peaches. That's all right. Take two, if you want, Sam."

William Alonzo Malabar's old eyes were misty and he was laughing in short, sharp bursts, when he saw the rider on the black horse bulge out onto the dirt road far below him. The man's hand was upraised signaling him to stop and William Malabar hauled back still more on the reins, braking his wagon down with great effort.

There was something oddly familiar about the tall lone rider down below. Why, it's Brother Sam, William Mal-

abar thought wildly. But Brother Sam's two thousand miles away, master of an iron ore vessel on the Great Lakes now. He discarded the foolish idea almost immediately. But the man was thin enough and tall enough to be Sam, he smiled to himself.

At the bottom of the grade William Malabar reined in opposite the man on the dark horse, a great cloud of hot, strangulating dust stirred up by the wagon settling slowly over both men and animals.

William Malabar cocked his head forward to peer at this man who was staring at him now with dull, blank eyes. The stranger's face was long and rectangular, sweaty, dirty, bearded thick as Arizona chaparral. Bisecting his forehead lengthwise was an upraised pink welt of flesh, on his left cheek, traversing the dark beard like a mountain ridge, another welt.

Suddenly, involuntarily, William Malabar raised his hand to his own face, ran his fingers along the line of his jaw from ear to chin, tracing his own ridge of distorted flesh.

"Hello, William," Malabar said softly to the man on the dark horse, and the warm core of whiskey inside him chilled and rose in his stomach.

The other man nodded. "Paw," he said.

Neither man made any movement toward shaking hands. No hint of a smile was raised between them.

"Well, William, it's sure good to see you again," said the elder Malabar, attempting a heartiness he did not feel. "Come back for Travis' wedding, did you?" He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his face with the neckerchief lying wet and flat on the top of his head. "Country's sure hot. Hotter'n Texas, William." He put the neckerchief back on his head and clamped his hat over it, its four corners hanging down limply from under the hat brim.

"Travis' wedding?" the man on the black horse said. "Travis getting married?"

"Why, yes, William. You mean he didn't write you that? You mean that isn't the reason—?"

"No, Paw."

"Well, Travis' getting married all right. Next week. Marrying that Wade woman. The redhead with the boy." William Malabar spoke fast, much faster than was his wont, trying desperately to get the whiskey glaze out of his eyes, out of his mind, out of his system. "I guess you don't know her, William. Not a good match for Travis. They aren't suited. Aren't suited. at all. Nothing good can come out of it. I'm against it, myself, but Travis set his mind on it. Says that boy needs a father. Not a bad woman but too much talk about her. Right or wrong, where there's that much talk there's bound—"

"Paw!"

The older man stopped.

"I hear a wagon coming. We'd better get off the trail." He reined his black gelding into the wash.

"Why that dry wash don't go noplase, son. Nothing but rocks and cactus down there."

"C'mon, Paw!" The man spoke sharply.

"Why don't we go in to Charleston and have us a drink and then talk? It's only a few miles. Or better, let's go on to the ranch, boy, and see Travis and all have a talk. A good talk, boy! What are we doing out here among the lizards and snakes?" But there was no real question in the way he spoke it.

"Paw!" The voice was harsh now, an order.

William Malabar reined his wagon into the wash and followed his son, the wheels clacking on the small smooth rocks.

"If we were at the ranch I could show you my peaches. I'm raising peaches too, William. There's no fresh fruit in this country. What little we get has to be shipped in. Price is fantastic. First man who grows fruit here'll be rich.



We'll all be rich, boy. There's a real market in Tombstone and Charleston and the Army forts hereabouts."

In the lengthening, jagged blue shadows cast by the large bald-faced rocks, Emmett Graham observed William Malabar and the rider of the black horse approach. The two men were in conversation but Emmett Graham could not hear them until the heavily armed stranger suddenly laughed. It was a deep, dark, toneless laugh, totally lacking in mirth.

"Peaches!" he cried. "In this country? Cattle and peaches! You're drunk. You've been drunk all your life. Prairie schooners, tinned beef, alfalfa—now peaches!"

"I'm not drunk, hear? I've got some land up in the foothills along the creek that'll grow peaches. I know it will! It'll grow anything, give it water."

"Has anything you ever done turned out good?" There was quiet contempt in the man's voice.

"You got no right to talk to me like that, boy."

"I got every right!"

They were almost upon the big rocks now. William Malabar looked up and saw the small, thin-lipped man sitting quietly on his wagon in the shade of the rocks.

"Why—why, it's Emmett Graham," William Malabar said. "What're you doing here, Emmett?"

Emmett Graham shrugged.

"You know my eldest son William, here, Emmett?" said William Malabar.

"Bowie's the name," said the man on the black horse. "Name like a knife."

"We ain't formally met," said Emmett Graham. "Didn't know but Travis was your only son."

"No, no. I got two of them. This here's the eldest. Been gone two, three years, William has. I guess that's why. Up Cheyenne way last I heard. It's been over three years this time hasn't it, William?"

"The name's Bowie."

"Sheep-herding!" The old man spat into the dirt. "Travis told me. Never thought you'd ever get mixed up with those woollies. Oh, I didn't mean that, William—"

"Like a knife."

The old man's face reddened.

"I must apologize, Emmett. His real name is William Bowie Malabar. His maw named him. The William's for me, and the Bowie is for that fellow that got himself killed at the Battle of the Alamo with all those others. You know, James Bowie. Even as a kid he liked to be called Bowie."

"Bowie's the name," the man on the dark horse said.

William Malabar hunched his shoulders at Emmett Graham. "Emmett's a neighbor of mine, William. Raises potatoes and some barley. Done right smart with those potatoes. Like I've been telling you about those peaches. How much you get for your potatoes last year, Emmett? Emmett?"

"Ten cents a pound."

"See what I mean, William?"

"You've become a real talker, haven't you, Paw?" Bowie Malabar dismounted, throwing the reins over his horse's head so they trailed on the ground. "What makes you such a fine talker these days?"

"Boy—"

"Liquor?"

"Boy—"

"Get down, Paw."

"What—?"

"Get down. I said get down! The visiting's over. I didn't travel eight hundred miles to hear you jaw all day."

Slowly the older man climbed down from the wagon. "I'm sorry you got to hear this, Emmett. Real sorry. All right, boy, the visiting's over." William Malabar faced his son. They were both big men, but the son was several

inches taller, leaner; the older man stocky, lines of age and weariness etched deep around the eyes and mouth, the facial skin heavily tanned, creased by wrinkles. Fine, purple lines sprinkled the nose and cheeks where liquor had begun to mark him.

He moved a few yards down the wash and the younger man followed him. "Does he have to be here?" said the older man nodding at Emmett Graham.

"Yes," said Bowie Malabar.

William Malabar sat down on a low flat boulder out-thrust from the bank of the wash. He took off his hat and wiped his face. His thinning gray-brown hair lay in damp twisted shanks along the top of his head. "You been waiting long?" he said.

"Not so long, Paw."

"You look like you been riding far. Sorry I kept you waiting." He scuffed at a small rock with the toe of his boot, then peered up at this tall, sweat-stained, heavily armed length of man that was his son. "How'd you know where I was?"

"I was at the ranch."

"You was at the ranch! You see Travis?" A tiny flicker of hope spanned the old man's face.

"No. He was out on the range somewhere riding circle."

"Oh."

"The Mexican told me."

"Oh, Compadre. Fat one, with the leg?"

"Yeah."

"Compadre. How'd you like the spread?"

The younger man didn't answer.

"It's livable," said the older man. "Even your maw thought so!" he added defiantly and then subsided. The last of the bulwark of whiskey had disappeared. He felt depressingly sober. "Travis wrote you, huh, William? That's it? That's why you're here?"

The younger Malabar nodded.

"And he didn't mention his getting married." The old man sighed. "That's funny."

"Maybe he didn't figure the two went together."

"He's right. They don't. So?"

"So—" Bowie Malabar's head barely moved—"I came back to kill you, Paw."

The old man blinked. He slumped forward slightly on the rock. "Thought so." It was funny the way the boy said it, the old man thought. Like he was asking for a second serving of beans. No, it wasn't funny, wasn't funny at all.

"She died peacefully, son. As peacefully as she could with those lungs of hers. Coughed a little before the end, that's all. Said she heard the owl hoot. Guess she was right. Guess I'm hearing it right now." Suddenly the old man straightened up. "You've got no right to judge me, boy."

"I've already judged you, Paw."

"You think there's only one standard of right and wrong and that's yours. Well, there's more to it than just black and white. You should've found that out by now. You've been all over this here country, son, but there's a lot of things you don't know." He paused for breath. "You never been married, have you? Then what right have you to judge me? What right? I'm not responsible for your mother's death. I didn't kill her."

"Didn't you? Dead at forty-six. Is that an age for a woman to die?"

"Ask Travis. He doesn't hold me responsible. This isn't going to set easy with Travis, you know. You ought to see your brother. He's been with us these years. He knows."

"I don't have to see Shug about nothing, Paw. Nothing."

"He's not a boy any more, William. He's twenty-five, old enough to be getting married, old enough to understand. Hear? He's not Shug any more. He's Travis. He's

a grown man. And he doesn't need you any more. I'm betting this'll cause nothing but trouble. I don't want to see that."

"You won't see it, Paw. You won't see anything."

"Oh, Jesus Christ, boy! Don't you understand I loved your maw. I loved her! I didn't want to see her die." He was breathing very hard now.

"You loved her and you beat her! Beat her when you knew she was sick."

"I haven't laid a hand on your Maw in years. And I'm sorry, sorrier than you'll ever know for every time I did lay a hand on her—or you, for that matter." The old man threw up his hands weakly.

"You loved her but you worked her like a goddamn Mexican cowhand when she was sick."

"I didn't want to work her, but when you don't have much money you do the best you can. It's too hard for you to understand, I suppose."

"And the money?" Bowie said softly, "the money? You took the money I sent home to her for doctors and medicines and for you to hire a woman to help her with the house and chores—you took that money and spent it on rotgut and things like those goddamn peaches! Didn't you? Didn't you? While she still worked like a damn slave!"

"Boy," the old man whimpered, "your mother was doomed for four years. All the doctors I ever took her to, said it. She was living on borrowed time, that's all. Borrowed time."

"And that's how you made her last years easier. Treating her like an old used-up dog."

"Boy, I never treated her like a dog, never. I brought her here to this country twelve years ago to get her well. Remember?"

Malabar's chest sagged. He felt tired and his face felt very stiff and strange. This son had brought him up

against a blank wall. It was true he had known Cornelia was doomed as long as four years ago. That's when his heavy drinking had started. Her death sentence had put the final seal on a life of continuous frustration, a life measured only by its failures. It was also true that he had used the money sent home by his son, to help finance his peaches, the peaches that might make them all rich, might get him back to Salem. When you don't have much money you did the best you could. And Cornelia had never complained. She'd understood. Still, he wasn't proud of the way he'd used that money. And what had he to show for it now? The peaches were one year away from bearing, Cornelia was dead, and he himself was fast turning into a drunkard.

"I swear to God I never killed your Maw," William Malabar said hoarsely. A knot of fear swelled in his throat as he stared at the taut, implacable face of his son standing but a few feet from him. He turned violently toward Emmett Graham, lost in the shadows of the big rocks.

"Sure sorry you got to hear this, Emmett. Wish we'd got better acquainted, Emmett. I hope you have no more trouble with your barley. And I hope you have no worries with potato bugs this year. I hope those potatoes make you rich. Aw, hell!"

The sun dipped toward the Huachuca Mountains, casting long blue shadows on the creosote and curling yellow grass on the valley floor. William Malabar gazed hungrily out across the valley as far as eyes could search.

This was not the stormy, rock-ribbed coast of New England where salt and foam were the very breath of life for a young boy. This was not the shining slopes of the Green Mountains with the sparkling, tumbling, cold water streams where he had hunted bear that wonderful nineteenth summer of his life. Nor was it the rugged, razor-scarped Sangre de Christo range near Taos on the Santa

Fe Trail he'd traveled a year later. Nor was it Texas either, where he'd married Cornelia and started his family—Texas with its curling, grass-covered prairies swaggered up to the very horizon; its sky so vast it smothered you; its post oak and wide river bottoms, cane-braked, thickly forested; the *brasada*, the rough brush country, chaparral, mesquite, yucca, pancake prickly pear, all clutching, tearing at you.

This territory of Arizona was like no other he had ever known. It was hard country, volcanic, granitic, shaped by prehistoric giants, a land of metals, grass, cattle, cactus and desert, and meager but fertile cropland along the slow river bottoms and cool creeks. It could be good country for those who worked it, who knew it. And William Malabar had thought he might finally be able to sink his old tired roots here. Not deep roots, maybe—he had never been able to do that—but shallow ones like the thorned cactus, spreading out to catch every drop of moisture, in the only way to survive that he knew.

He breathed deeply of the dry warm air, remembering how Cornelia had breathed of it when he'd shown her this land for the first time twelve years ago. "Smell that air, Mama," he said. "Smells good, doesn't it? Let it into your lungs slow. See how everything out here's got stickers and thorns on it, Mama? Takes thorns to grow in this land."

She'd looked at it briefly and said in her way, "If the Lord wills it, we'll grow thorns then, Father."

Well, they'd grown thorns. And one of them was right in front of him now getting ready to kill him.

William Malabar felt very weary. And old, very old. And full of fear.

He shook his head. "Ever since I can remember," he said raggedly, "you were uncommonly set against me. Rotten seed, I used to blame you on. But guess it was my

fault. Sure seems strange though. Now." He turned his hands up and looked deeply and intently into the palms as if the answer were located there.

Then he took off his dirty gray hat, removed his neckerchief and patted his face and hands with it.

"Damn, son, it's hot. Too hot to die." He grinned crookedly. It didn't come off. His face was too stiff to hold it.

"It's never that hot, Paw," the inscrutable face said to him.

"Guess you're right." He replaced the neckerchief. Bitterness riled his stomach. It was a grim joke, William Malabar thought. Of all the grim jokes life had played on him this was the grimmest. Is this what my loins gave up, this thing come to kill me? Is it possible? William Malabar searched his son's face. There was no doubt about it. It held no mercy. No understanding, no compassion. Nothing but warped flesh and blankness.

How tell him—how possibly tell him what a marriage was like when he didn't know himself? That it was a hummock of small joys trying to balance a mountain of mutual harassments? Maybe. How tell him of all the times a man wants to be free, to be alone? Who knows whether a human being is supposed to be tied to another forever and a day, or if he is supposed to run free, alone, until mating time like those wild animals he'd trapped and hunted that single idyllic year high in the shimmering Green Mountains, when he'd finally escaped the stifling shadow of his brother Sam?

How tell him how good it was in the beginning between Cornelia and himself? How it became too familiar, too warped by the pressures of living, till a man felt he owned his wife and children like chairs or tables or other pieces of household furniture, and expected them to act like furniture, though they never did.



How tell him how tough a marriage really was?

How tell him about all the secret desires for other women? He could have been like a stallion. How tell him of the sweetness of lying in green grass with a Taos maiden as soft and brown and springy as the very Taos earth?

How tell him he was sorry, truly sorry, that in the press of living he had drifted so far away from his boys and the way they were growing up?

How tell this one, this Texan sprung from his New England loins, who had never learned to step back—how tell this stranger, his son, how necessary it was to compromise in order to live, to survive? How tell him now?

Looking into the welted inscrutability of his son's face, William Malabar knew it was impossible. There was no compromise, no forgiveness, among the knotted ridges and the dark beard.

Standing there the boy was so much like Sam. Tall, lean, positive. Judge, jury, executioner. Maybe if the boy had leaned more toward him, instead of toward Sam, they'd have gotten on better; maybe—with effort William Malabar held back a violent urge to vomit.

He rose unsteadily from the rock. "Emmett, Emmett Graham," he hollered to the small man, frozen still on his wagon. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything I kin, William."

"I got a wedding present for Travis and the Wade woman on my wagon. Will you see Travis gets it?"

"What is it, William?"

"It's a shoofly. Isn't much. Best I could do right now."

Emmett Graham nodded.

"Thank you, Emmett." He jerked his head at his son. "I don't guess he'll be staying around long enough to do it for me."

"I don't need to stick around and see anyone," his son

said. "Shug, nor anyone. Him and me always understood each other."

"For your sake, boy, I hope you're right. You and Travis was always so close as boys. I always wanted to see you stay that way. But you been gone too long." He shook his head. "You're a Cimarron cow, boy. You been out on a high lonesome too long, scattering your tracks. This'll ruin it between you two. He'll never understand. I don't dare think of how this'll end. Never wanted you two to be like me and my brother."

His shoulders slumped. He took off his hat and began to fan himself with it. "What do you want out of this here life, boy? Haven't you found it yet? Is killing me the only way to satisfy that hunger of yours? Is it?" He knew he was going to get no answer. Slowly he rolled the brim of his hat between his fingers. "All right, William," he swallowed hard, "how you want to do it?"

"Fair and square, Paw. Go for your gun. You make first move."

The older man walked ten paces down the wash. Somewhere in a clump of mesquite a shading covey of doves were cooing. An ore wagon was stampeding through the dust down Pick-'em-up Grade. The old man clamped his hat back on and faced his son. His legs felt soft, fiberless. It was difficult to stand.

"Fair and square, huh? Fair and square?" His voice rose, wavering. "Anybody ever outdraw you yet? Huh? Answer me that, boy. Did they? Answer me."

"You make first move, Paw." The tall man stood rigid, arms hanging loosely at his sides.

"You hear that, Sam," said William Malabar facing toward Emmett Graham. "Fair and square, Sam." His eyes bored hot and deep into Emmett Graham, his voice trembled down the wash. "He's a good boy, Sam. Thor-

ough, efficient, in everything he does. Even brought you for a witness, Sam. See what I mean? When this is over you do everything he says, Sam. I drew first. You understand, Sam? Sam!" Emmett Graham finally nodded. "Go for your gun, he says, Sam. You make the first move. Now that's a gentleman speaking. Like you, Sam. Not like me. A gentleman." He began to laugh hysterically, a high, wobbly laugh, quavering through the wash. Abruptly he stopped and there were tears in his eyes. "I should have gone to sea, Sam. I should have gone with you. I should—"

"Paw!" It cracked through to him like a pistol shot.

He stared vacantly at the tall, grimy man thirty feet away, his long hands absolutely motionless along his sides. Behind him the sun was setting. *The sun was setting!* What had Sam written him once?

*. . . You're a man, William, that's lived too long on the sunset side of the mountains. Come back home where the sun rises. There's still opportunity at sea. I have a mate's ticket open for you. You could sail under me . . .*

Funny, but it was true. The sun had never risen on him. It had always set. It was setting now.

"It's setting," he said suddenly.

"I'm waiting," the tall man said.

"You're rotten seed, boy," he burst out. "Rotten. I told your Maw that before you ever ran away the first time. I always told her you'd come to no good. You're rotten seed. Plain rotten seed, I tell you."

"I reckon you can hobble your lip now, Paw," the tall man said, the welts reddening against his beard. "For good."

The old man's face contorted with this last desperate vengeful anger. Slowly it drained away, leaving him standing there bloodless, bone-hollow, shivering like a man naked in snow.

"All right, Bowie. All right. All right. All right." Each time he said it he intended going for his gun. Each time he didn't. His arms were glued to his sides.

"Paw!" The single word flicked him like a lash.

"I'm drawing, I am, I am." Sam wouldn't act like this, he thought, Sam wouldn't be this scared. "Here I come. I'm coming. I'm coming." His hand crawled to his gun, fingers stiff and cold. He had it almost drawn from his holster—God, it was heavy—and the boy had made no move for his own gun yet. William Malabar wondered what he should do. He couldn't fire at him, his own flesh and blood. He could beat him, beat him unmercifully, this rotten seed, but he couldn't shoot him. He had just decided he would fire harmlessly into the wash over the boy's head when he saw the boy's hand start for his gun.

William Malabar watched in fascination. He had seen a lot of gunslingers in his time. The movement was always the same, and it always fascinated him. Smooth, unhurried, sure. Like a well-oiled piston moving in a cylinder. Down and then up.

He was thinking, Sam, he's good. Good! Sam . . .

He saw a faint flush, heard a fading, distant peal like thunder. The thought grew dimmer.

ZOANNA WADE wakened that morning with the sunlight heavy and burning on her eyelids as it reflected from the whitewashed walls of the low adobe house. She stretched, enjoying the seldom exercised pleasure of lying in bed after the sun had lifted above the mountains. She laid her left arm flat on the other half of the big bed, testing the coolness of it. She rolled over, throwing her right arm on top of the left so that both hands clasped. It wouldn't be this cool much longer. Her arms would soon embrace more than thin summer air. Reluctantly she rubbed the sunlight out of her eyes.

Just one more week, and there would be a man lying there. A man! Strong, hard-muscled, tough-fleshed, good. In this bed where no man had lain for three years now. Three years less two months, she corrected herself, smiling at the remembrance. She stiffened her legs, feeling an exquisite muscle spasm tingle all through her body. Her hands slipped down to her thighs, scrubbing them back and forth with the heels of her palms, heightening the sensation, ignoring the slight discomfort in the small of her back.

When she had fully exploited the pleasure of this massage she sat up and glanced at her son, Micaiah, sleeping in the smaller bed at the far side of the low-ceilinged room. He had his face turned to the cool adobe wall, with one

hand pressed against it, which the sun speckled with light and shadow.

*And Mica would have a father.* It was really a wonderful thought with which to start a new day. Zoanna Wade lay back in bed, her hands clasped behind her head. Suddenly she felt the pain in her back once more. The pain. The damn pain. She frowned, recalling that last night she had dreamed the same dream, or very nearly the same, she'd been having for almost three years now. The pain dream.

It was always the saguaros, the giant, green, thorny, ribbed thirty-foot-high cactus. She had really seen them only once in her life, when she and Reuben had passed through Tucson on their way here a little over three years ago. But these saguaros, without their usual candelabra arms, now filled the strange desert landscape of her fretful nights. She was always wandering through these lonely barbed sentinels. Sometimes she was naked; often she crawled slowly and aimlessly among them; at other times she ran wildly. Once she stroked them and the thorns had not stung her. Last night she had been naked again. She had lain flat on her back on the burning desert, incapable of movement, able only to stare upward, hypnotized by the giant saguaro cactus.

Zoanna Wade twisted convulsively under the light cotton blankets. This was a dream that frightened her and made her nervous. It was always accompanied by the pain in the back or the stomach or in the leg. She had never had this dream before Reuben died three years ago. Nor the pains either. They had stopped for a while after she had lain with Travis eight weeks ago. It was the first clue she'd had to what really might be wrong with her. But that made it no less distressing.

Well, lying in bed would not ease this ache. She rose and dressed quickly. She went to her son and shook him gently.

"Mica," she said softly, "Mica. Sun's up. We overslept."

Mica grunted. He rolled over letting his head sink into the sunlight streaming through the windows.

"Come on, Mica. Up now. Fetch me the cream from Julio and Appolonio. They'll wonder what's happened to you." She was already moving toward the kitchen adjoining the large combination bedroom-living room. Her eyes caught the almost empty woodbox by the stove. "You better fetch me some kindling, too, young man, if you want any breakfast—and if you want to go to town with me."

The boy jerked upright in bed, his young face red and pillow-streaked, his tallow hair smashed flat on one side of his head. "To town?" He was wide-awake now. "We going for sure today, Mama?"

"I told you that, Mica." Zoanna washing at the sink, hid a smile in the towel. "I've got a lot of things to do."

"Yes, ma'am!" The boy leaped out of bed and climbed into denim pants and a light blue cotton shirt. He stuffed a wooden pistol into his pants and bolted for the door. Town for Micaiah Wade wasn't the little stamp mill village of Charleston where he went to school. Town was Tombstone, the largest city in the territory of Arizona, the largest town Mica had ever seen anywhere.

"You wash when you come back—"

"Yes, Mama."

"And, Mica, you leave the chopping of those big mesquite logs to Julio. You can chop the smaller ones, you hear?"

"Aw, Mama."

"Do as I say now," Zoanna hollered after the running boy. "No sense in you trying to grow out of your pants so fast."

When the boy was gone she dipped water from the water bucket into an iron kettle till it was quarter full. She

placed the kettle on the old box stove and started a small fire with what kindling was left in the wood box.

Then she went back into the big room and made the beds, smoothing the white counterpanes down neatly. Finally, facing the mirror atop the walnut bureau Reuben had given her for a wedding present nine long years ago, she brushed her red hair straight back on either side of the center part. She was tying it in a circular bun in back when Mica clumped in with an armload of wood and kindling.

"Freshen the fire, will you, Mica?" she called to him.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And Mica, when you go for the cream tell Julio to hitch up the buggy for us."

"Yes, ma'am!"

She heard the boy race out again and she studied herself in the mirror. She was a big woman, boned and fleshed abundantly. Now only the top half of her was visible—wide, fair, full-lipped face with tiny red freckles dusting the bridge of her nose. Blue-gray eyes; strong, deep breasts. It was the best part of her and she was glad she could not see her hips, which she felt were a little too large. She shrugged at the mirror. A woman couldn't have everything. She set her hands under her full, burgeoning breasts and breathed in deeply. This is what I'm bringing to this marriage, Travis. This and forty milk cows and my butter and ice business. It is not altogether a small dowry, is it? In exchange for a man for me and a father for Mica? She smiled at the reflection in the glass, feeling a pride that she had not felt in some time.

For a widow woman she had done remarkably well in this harsh Indian country. They had said she was foolish, she would never last. But she had lasted. It had not been the easiest thing she had ever done. When she and Reuben and Mica had come from Prescott to Tombstone in '79, after



the great silver strike, she had hated it just as she'd hated all the other dreary mining boom towns where Reuben was always going to make his big strike and never did. The endless tents, wooden shanties, black mud, blazing heat, blue flies; the stink, the drunkenness, with Eldorado always just around the corner. Any feeling that had ever existed between herself and Reuben had long since withered away, smothered in mud, stench, and broken dreams. Yet when Reuben had been killed in a drunken brawl that year, there was no relief, no joy in her own heart.

She had felt panicky, helpless, completely alone. The only good things that had ever come out of her marriage were Mica and the insurance policy Reuben had taken out on himself for the boy. With the money from the policy she had come here along the San Pedro River, near Lewis Springs. She had built this adobe house herself with the help of her two Mexican hands, Julio and Appolonio. She had built the blockhouse, the corrals, the barn, the bunk-house. She had purchased ten milk cows with the last of the insurance money and sold her milk and butter in Charleston and Tombstone. The restaurant owners and storekeepers had been glad to help a poor widow woman. After she'd made up her mind to stay, everybody helped her.

With Julio and Appolonio she'd gone to the higher reaches of Barbacomori Creek and cut ice in the winter and packed it in sawdust and stored it in the coolness of a sunken dugout. She'd received six cents a pound for the ice from the town merchants and saloon keepers. She'd bought more cows. She'd survived.

She had not had any trouble with cows being stolen, or fences burned or torn down, or water rights strong-armed away, as had most of the other small ranchers in the valley, mainly, she suspected, because swaggering, pimple-faced, nineteen-year-old Billy Clanton had a youthful

crush on her. Since the Clanton tribe was generally regarded as one of the ringleaders behind the rustling in the San Pedro Valley, it was likely that they had passed the word to leave the widow woman alone. Anyhow, she had taken great pains not to antagonize the Clantons, and particularly Billy, without at the same time raising his hopes too high. With Billy that had not been easy. But if you had to do something badly enough, it could be done.

Yes, she had a right to feel proud now. It *was* no small dowry she would be bringing Travis Malabar next week.

If Travis Malabar was four years younger than she, and not a roughhouse, fist-swinging, drunken gunslinger like most of the young bucks in this country, that was fine with her. She'd had her share of the wild life with Reuben. Travis was the man she wanted now and the man she had gotten. Maybe she even loved him. At least she felt she would grow to love him. He was what she wanted more than anything else.

So let some of the neighbors and townspeople talk. Let them look at her. Let them whisper behind their hands. She knew her own problem, and she would solve it as she'd solved the others before.

Zoanna Wade went back into the kitchen. The water in the kettle was boiling. From her staple chest in the corner under the coffee grinder, with its cupboards of grains, meal, coffee beans, dried fruit and dried beef, she scooped two large ladles of rolled oats and dropped them into the boiling water. From the pantry she brought a pan of baked biscuits to the stove to warm as Mica and Appolonio entered the house with two huge cans of cream, which they set next to the butter churn.

"I will be taking the milk to town soon, *señora*," said Appolonio, a short, slender Mexican with dark oily skin. "Are there any butter orders?"

"Yes, Appolonio. Take one tub in the cellar to Quong Kee's restaurant in Charleston. And tell Julio to take him some ice too."

"No ice, *señora*."

"But this is only the twenty-first of July! Last year we had ice well into August."

"It is true, *señora*. But there are more people in Tombstone now. Our ice does not last so long. Maybe we should build another cellar?"

She nodded. "Perhaps you're right, Appolonio. I'll speak to Mr. Malabar. Oh, Appolonio? We won't be back till late this evening. You and Julio take good care of everything."

"Do not worry." He looked at her out of wide, amused eyes. She understood that look. This morning it gave her no pleasure.

"Appolonio, Mrs. Murphy told me Apache signs were found near the springs yesterday."

"Is that so?" The man look was gone from those dark brown eyes. "We will corral the cows then."

"I think it is wise. And check the blockhouse for provisions."

"*Sí, señora*. I will tell Julio." The Mexican bowed out quickly.

"Mica," Zoanna said, stirring the oats, not looking at him.

"Yes, Mama?" He had been standing rigid, listening intently.

"Mrs. Murphy told me Paddy and you found those Indian signs at Lewis Springs. Is that true?"

"I guess so."

"Why didn't you tell me, Mica? Did you want to be killed? Did you want me to be killed? And Appolonio and Julio and all your friends in this valley? Supposing

Paddy had been like you and not told his mother and supposing the Apaches attacked with no one prepared for them?"

"Oh, Mama! There hasn't been an Indian attack here in over a year. Every time there's a sign of an Indian within twenty miles you keep me shut up here around the house. Can't go noplac. Can't do nothing."

"Mica, maybe those Indians are only down there to steal a cow, I don't know. But if anyone else knew that you'd seen Indian sign and hadn't told me, I—well, I wouldn't be able to hold my head up around here. You have a duty to yourself, son, and a duty to your neighbors too. Do you understand?"

"I guess so."

"I don't want this ever to happen again."

"I'm sorry, Mama. Oh, gosh! That Paddy. That coward Paddy Murphy!"

"What about Paddy?"

"He wasn't supposed to tell his mother. We were going to get those Indians ourselves if they were anywhere around. We were going to kill 'em."

"How in the world did you two children expect to do that?"

"I don't know, Mama, but we were going to do it. We sure were."

"Mica, Mica, I declare, Mica, you worry me. Honest you do." She took out the flat mush stick and brandished it at him. "Now, listen to me, you promise you'll never do anything, or think of anything that foolish again. Promise now, before I lay this mush bat across you. I didn't raise you to get killed by no Indians."

"I promise."

"All right. Get washed now and set down at the table. Wait! Did you empty the chamber pots yet?"

He wrinkled his freckled nose. "No, Mama."

"No washing, no breakfast till that's done. Now git, you little Indian killer. I don't know why I have to tell you that every morning. Maybe Travis can do something with you. Well, git, git." There was no real anger in the way she spoke.

After breakfast she dumped the cream from the cans into the wooden churn and pumped the vertical piece attached to the wooden cylinder of the churn until the cream began to thicken and turn yellow.

Mica came and stood beside her as she pumped the wooden piston up and down. "Is it ready?"

"Not yet, Mica. But soon."

Mica went into the other room and sat down at the table and watched her. She was shaking all over and her face was red. He kicked his legs.

"Mama," Mica called. "Mama?"

She kept churning, not looking up.

"I don't want to get you killed, Mama."

She stopped, breathing very hard. "All right, Mica." A flitting smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "All right."

Mica saw the smile and laughed. He kicked his legs harder.

It was only ten-thirty when they left the low, white-washed adobe house and started the three-hour ride to Tombstone; yet, already the Lash, Liver and Bitters thermometer nailed in the shade of the rose-shrouded front porch read 98 degrees.

For the first leg of the trip Zoanna acquiesced to Mica's wordless request and handed him the reins of the buckboard. She clamped her hand to her sunbonnet as he giddyapped the two old mares at a brisk trot under the tall greening cottonwoods along the slow, clear San Pedro River.

None of the neighbors whose small ranches and spreads they passed were out in their yards this morning; it was much too hot; and as there were no other riders so late in the morning to notice his horsemanship on the clacketing buckboard, Mica soon grew tired and bored. When the trail bent east to make juncture with the Tombstone-Charleston road, sweeping out of the shade of the cottonwoods and into the bright glare of the sand and dusty sage, Mica gladly relinquished the reins to his mother.

Zoanna Wade slowed the sweating horses down and proceeded on the second leg of the journey. She had long ago learned that raising a son was a perpetual game, or perhaps a battle, with the battleground one continuous frontier.

She knew she could have given a flat no to Mica's constant pleas to drive the buckboard when they went to town, arguing that he was too small, too young; she could have allowed him to drive on the wider but more heavily traveled and hence more dangerous Tombstone-Charleston road; or she could have done exactly as she did allowing him the reins along the comparative safety of the San Pedro River.

In this instance she felt she had solved the problem pretty well. Even though she was convinced Mica was generally a good boy, there were other phases of this growing-up battle she was not sure of. She had too warm an affection for the boy to be as strict as she knew she sometimes ought to be in this stern, rugged country where if left to their own devices things could grow wild like the cactus or harshly like some of the ruthless men here now. After all, there were only the two of them. Without love and affection they would have nothing. She welcomed the prospect of a husband, a father, to help her in this uneven tug-of-war between a mother and her only son.

It was a cloudless, smoky, blue sky they drove under and she could feel the beads of sweat forming on her neck, sliding down her back, dampening her blue calico dress. She tipped forward to lift her dress away from her skin and the back of the buckboard seat.

Mica streaked for his wooden gun and blasted away at a bullwhacker going toward Charleston, scuffing dust as he walked alongside his twelve-ox team. The bullwhacker cursed, turned, and popped his long black snake whip a foot from Mica's gun. The boy was startled, angered. He shot at all twelve of the oxen. "Pow, Pow . . ." He shot at every rig, wagon or horse they passed on the Tombstone road.

When they forged to the rise of Pick-'em-up Grade and the baking, bald face of the Dragoon Mountains was visible in the distance straight ahead, Mica aimed his gun and his attention at Sheepshead in the Dragoons.

"Pow! Cochise. Pow! Geronimo. Pow! One-eye. Pow! 'Pache Jack. Pow!"

"'Bout out of bullets, aren't you?" Zoanna asked, in amusement.

"No, Mama. Pow! for Wild Bill Hickok. Pow! for Billy the Kid. Pow, pow for Buffalo Bill. Pow for Bat Master-son. Pow for Doc Holliday. Wes Hardin, pow, pow! Ben Thompson. Pow for A.J. Dunit." He raked the whole, bristled, craggy face of the Dragoons with his fire. "Pow! How many Indians up there, Mama? Pow!"

"Hundreds and hundreds, Mica. Too many. You'd better reload, hadn't you?"

"Pow! Pow! When am I going to get a real gun, Mama? Pow!"

"When you're old enough to use one, that's when."

"All the boys at school carry pistols. Real ones too."

"What boys?"

"Burleigh Graham, Jerry Nelson, Utah Tote—they."

"Well, Burleigh Graham's twelve years old, Jerry's thirteen, and that new boy, Utah, is twelve, too. Does Paddy Murphy have a pistol?"

"No, but—"

"When you're twelve, maybe you can have a pistol too."

"Aw, Mama." He stopped his shooting and frowned thoughtfully. "Four years?"

She nodded.

"I can't wait that long, Mama." He glanced longingly at the Spencer carbine sheathed in the rifle boot on his mother's side of the buckboard. "I can use a gun, Mama."

"You'll wait. Maybe by then you won't be so interested in guns. Maybe, Mica, you'll be a little more inclined to be a doctor. Where's that old stethoscope Dr. Brown gave you? I don't see you carrying it any more."

"It's at the house."

"Better your wearing that than that gun of yours, young man."

"Don't want to be no doctor no more."

Suddenly Mica laughed. "You should have seen their faces, Mama."

"Whose faces? I declare! The way you jump around!"

"Burleigh's and Jerry's and Utah's, and the other big boys, of course."

"How's that, Mica?" she inquired patiently.

"When the new teacher told them this spring they couldn't wear their pistols in the classroom. Paddy and me thought they were going to have a fight for a while."

"Well, did they?"

"Naw! They took them off and checked them in the cloakroom. Their faces were sure red. All the girls laughed at them, too. That made it worse. Burleigh said he was going to whip that new teacher after school. But he never did. Paddy and me sure laughed, too." He stole a curious glance at her then. "Mama, what's a bold glance?"



She was visibly startled. "What're you talking about, a bold glance, Mica?"

"Paddy said his Maw told his Paw that you had a bold glance. Pow!"

"Paddy said that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Right after we saw the Indian tracks. His Maw said you was a bold woman, too. Said everyone knew it. I knocked him down. He said it like he wanted me to, like it was something bad. Pow! Pow! It isn't anything bad, is it, Mama?"

"Of course not. It means—it means, Mica, it means an—an honest look. Same thing as an honest look. You can tell that Paddy Murphy that's what it is!"

"Yes, Mama. I knew it was nothing bad. I don't know why I knocked him down. Pow, pow!"

Mica, Mica! she thought. A boy needs a father! Needs a man to help him. But what she really meant, and she knew it very well, was a woman needs a man! Oh, God! It'll only be another week.

Through the low teepees of the Tombstone hills they could see the dim dusty outline of the town now, setting up on a hogback mesa rising from the grass- and brush-covered desert floor. Heat waves shimmered in a violet haze over the rooftops.

The two mares, knowing food and rest were only a short distance ahead now, picked up speed. Even Mica ceased shooting and put his gun back in his waistband. His tallow-colored hair streamed out over his head like the yellow curing grama grass lying forward with the wind.

She ran a hand tenderly over the boy's head. "Boy needs a father, Mica. You understand that, Mica?"

"Yes, Mama."

"You glad, Mica?"

"Glad what?"

"Glad you're getting a new father, Mica?"

"I guess so."

"Boy needs a father for a lot of things. To go hunting with, trapping, fishing. A father can teach a boy a lot of things a woman can't. He'll help us both. It isn't so easy for a woman, all alone."

"I know, Mama. But I can help."

"I know you can. And you do."

"I mean more, Mama." He frowned. "He can't shoot. He don't even have a gun."

"What are you talking about, Mica?"

"Travis. He can't shoot."

"Why he can too, Mica."

"Don't carry a pistol."

"He doesn't have to carry a pistol. Lots of folks don't carry a pistol. They have their rifles."

"Not lots, Mama. Hardly anybody."

"All a person needs for protection from the Apaches or anything else is a rifle. Anyone carrying a pistol is inviting trouble."

"Kids at school say when he goes to Charleston or Tombstone and the fellows pick on him he doesn't even fight back. Doesn't do anything. They say—he's a sissy."

"He's not, Mica. He's not! He's good and kind and gentle. And he works hard. You know how nice everything looks at the Malabars. You know how Mr. Malabar drinks and Travis has to do almost all the work."

"Yes, Mama."

"He just doesn't believe in violence, in fighting, killing, swearing, drinking. A man doesn't have to be like that, You know what your Bible says about those things."

"Oh, Mama!"

"You should be more like Travis, young man, instead of

some of these wild hellions you look up to so much. Don't listen to all that idle gossip. Anybody who has no more to do than spread stories about someone else is lazy, shiftless, and plain no-account. And anyone who listens to them is just as bad. You understand that, Mica?"

"Yes, Mama." He whipped out his gun and she knew he was tiring of this conversation.

"Mica, you don't really mind, do you? I mean, me getting married to Travis?" She looked down at the wide-eyed, open, sunburnt face of her son. "It's important, Mica."

"No, Mama." He grinned that quick warm revelation of a grin that had been his father's. "Pow! Pow!" He drilled the grizzled mule skinner riding jerk line on the wagon clanking past them.

Zoanna steered the buckboard carefully down the arroyo just outside of Tombstone and up the far side into town. The big mine shafts were on her right—the Lucky Cuss, Vizna, the Grand Central, the Contention. She crossed Tough Nut Street lined with its unpainted wooden miners' cabins, drove one block straight ahead on First Street and turned right into Allen, leaving the white headboards of Boot Hill directly behind her. Allen was the main thoroughfare of Tombstone and it was always like making a grand entrance to enter Tombstone down wide and dusty Allen. Everyone did it.

Zoanna halted the buckboard in front of the horse rack at the two-story Russ House.

"Now, Mica—" she laid a hand on her son's arm—"I want you to stay here with 'Aunt Nellie' until I get my dress fitted. I don't want you out on the streets alone. You understand?"

"Yes, Mama."

"If you wait here and be a good boy we'll have a Concord Punch at Mr. Hengemann's when I get back.

Above all I don't want you running off to the Marshal's office again. Promise?"

"I promise."

"You might go to Dr. Brown's office, if you want. He won't mind. You know how he likes to have you."

"I don't want to go to no doctor's office, Mama."

"All right," she sighed, "all right. Come on now, let's go inside and see 'Aunt Nellie.'"

It wasn't until midafternoon that she finally was able to break away from "Aunt Nellie," the young, pretty and highly articulate proprietress of the Russ House. She was already late for her fitting so she walked quickly to the main shopping area and Suzanne Hollet's Millinery on Fremont.

It gave her a lift to have the city men in their white shirts and black string ties and the professional gamblers in their flowered waistcoats smile at her and doff their hats as she passed them. Even the frank, appraising glances of the dusty cowhands leaning against the walls of the saloons talking quietly, their big hats pushed far back on their heads, pleased her, made the color rise in her cheeks, although she made a distinct effort to look straight ahead and not let them know she had noticed.

At Suzanne Hollet's Millinery shop she tried on the white wedding dress that Suzanne had altered. She had been married in it once and she would marry in it again. It was a trifle too tight in the hips now, and while Suzanne's girls let it out again she drank tea and made more woman's talk with Suzanne and other female acquaintances who came into the shop, about the wedding, the dress, the latest Eastern fashions, the fire in town, Garfield's assassination, the slaying of Joe Gormand and Leland Wright in the Huachuca Mountains, and finally and most prolongedly, as she had done earlier with "Aunt Nellie," they

just talked of men in general, as husbands, as lovers, as the great necessary evil.

The talk ceased when a young man entered the shop wearing a dark broadcloth suit and embroidered waist-coat. A full, drooping Royal mustache crescented his upper lip. He bought a small red hat with two black feathers on it while all the women watched him and pretended not to. He smiled brazenly at Zoanna.

"Stop smiling at him," whispered Suzanne.

"Was I smiling?"

"Why do you think he was standing there grinning like a jackass?"

She blushed. "Really, Suzanne!"

"Gambler," whispered Suzanne. "Town's full of them now. Twenty-five dollars a day! That's what they're paid to fleece the miners and the waddies. He comes in here every week. Buys something for one of those soiled doves on Sixth Street. Every week seems like he has a new one."

The man finally left with his hat but the ladies' shop was still pungent with the man's presence, the male smell, the strong, not unpleasant odor of cigar, polished leather boots, hard flesh.

"You're lucky," Suzanne said, "to have a man you don't have to worry about like that one."

Zoanna tried the dress on again. It was almost right now. Suzanne sent out for more tea and Zoanna examined all the new materials, dresses and hats in the store.

Late that afternoon the dress was finally fitted. Suzanne Hollet assured her it was beautiful, that she was beautiful. She would wrap the dress and send it right over to the Russ House.

With the sun a bright red ball settling into the dust at the end of Fremont Street, Zoanna left Suzanne Hollet's

and headed for Hengelman's. She had no idea she'd spent so much time in the millinery shop. Except on rare occasions in the valley she had no one to talk to but Mica and the Mexicans. Town was like a breath of fresh air. She wouldn't trade the valley for town; she'd spent enough time in towns like this, but once in a while it was good to come here. But Lord, she wondered, blinking into the sun, where did the time go?

At Hengelmänn's she bought buttons and thread and smelled the perfumed soap hung up in wire baskets. Fifty cents a bar, the tiny sign said. She was tempted. She should smell sweet for Travis. No. He would have to get used to her the way she was, sometime. She would smell of strong homemade soap. She would not deceive him in this.

She'd just decided when a tall, sallow boy in an ink-stained apron wearing a too tight derby rushed into the store.

"They want you down at the Marshal's office," he said to old, bent Mr. Hengelmänn. "Dead man on a wagon."

Mr. Hengelmänn grumbled. "Do you mind if I finish waiting on this lady? Do you and the Marshal mind?"

The boy shuffled his feet awkwardly. "I don't mind. I just come to tell you."

"Thank you, my boy. Take your hat off."

The boy took his hat off. "Shot up real good," he mumbled, his pale face reddening.

"Anything else, Mrs. Wade?" the old man said patiently.

"No, thank you."

Hanging on a peg behind the counter was a large flat-crowned black hat. Next to it on another peg was a similarly styled white one. Mr. Hengelmänn turned now and reached for the black. He fitted it solidly and bowed his wrinkled neck.

The boy in the ink-stained apron followed the old man out the door and said something else to him. The only word Zoanna heard was Malabar. It was enough to start her running.





MICAIAH WADE knew that eventually he would wind up at the Marshal's office. He felt no guilt nor did he even feel a bit bad about it. It had been well over an hour since he made his promise to his mother. It was much too long ago to feel guilt now. And these infrequent visits to the Marshal's were the high points in his life. His mother just didn't understand.

But when he left Aunt Nellie's he decided he'd better outsmart his mother and not go to the Marshal's office immediately. If she should suddenly return to the Russ House and find him gone the Marshal's would be the first place she would look. No, first he would see the city, then he would go to the Marshal's office, where his mother was sure to look for him eventually.

Elated over the prospect of this additional freedom, he started quickly up Sixth. The houses were high here, two-story, wooden, some painted, most not. There was music and laughing and women screeching in all of them. Girls, pretty ones, ugly ones, thin ones, rolled their painted heads out of windows and around door jambs to observe the people on the walk. Cowboys in their huge hats, jangling spurs, fortified with drink; strong-armed, bearded miners speaking in unintelligible dialects, their black caps

low on their heads; mule skimmers, bullwhackers, a man in a flowered waistcoat carrying a box—all of them went inside the wooden houses.

A large, fat woman, her face as pasty as the belly of a frog, smoked a cigarette in one of the doorways and hollered at two cowboys leaning against the side of the big white house.

"Come on, you bums. Come on. Your money's good. Silver dollar, silver dollar—" She fixed on Mica. Her eyes roved to his gun on his belt.

"Boy, you ain't afraid, are you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Come in here and get your gun then." She laughed loudly, eying the cowboys.

"Boy, you better get off this street," said the smaller of the two cowboys.

"Yeah," said the other, "you want to keep your gun, git. That woman'll sure take it away from you." Both men laughed and jangled down the street, great booted men, legs bowed so you could drive a barrel cactus clean between them without scratching denim.

Mica decided he didn't like it here. He didn't care for these strange women whom he had once heard his mother call "soiled doves."

He ran back down to Allen, the main street of town. He stayed on the north side of the street, where most of the saloons and dance halls were. Here he knew he would not find his mother. The respectable women walked only on the south side of the street.

He could not see over the swinging doors of the Crystal Palace, and he moved away when cowhands came swinging out, buckling on their guns. He smelled the oysters cooking in the restaurants, watched the Tucson stage pulled by six white horses swirl the dust as it pulled up at the stage depot. Down the far side of the street the

water wagon moved slowly sprinkling water on the powder-dry earth.

He ran quickly through block-square Chinatown at the lower end of Allen, past the stores and houses jumbled together, past the slanties, pigtailed, staring at him with flat, puma eyes, as they smoked their funny pipes, wearing long dresses like women, but slit at the bottom, waiting to eat their weird foods.

He ran faster, up Tough Nut now, lined with the tiny rickety miners' cabins, and came out on Fremont. The Marshal's office was at the lower end of Fremont and Mica set out bravely for it.

It was a small white-washed adobe with a bullet-scarred door, located far enough away from the main shopping area so that the waging of the battle of law and order would not offend the sensibilities of Tombstone's more respectable citizens.

Mica knocked impatiently on the hallowed door. The sun was lowering rapidly. He had wasted too much time.

"Come in," a big voice boomed at him. "No need to knock."

He opened the door and closed it quickly, standing there against it motionless, not even breathing. A tall, droop-mustached man in a black hat, white shirt and string tie sat behind an old desk piled high with papers. Over his head on the wall were pegs hung with gun belts and guns. The other man, shorter, slenderer, in a black waistcoat, sat tilted on a hard-backed chair, his booted feet on the desk. He smoked a long cigar.

"Uh—oh, it's that boy again," this one said glancing at the man behind the desk. "I told you, Wyatt, we shouldn't have waited till Virgil got back. We should have gone to eat."

The man with the droopy mustache peered at the boy. "Your maw know you're here?"

"No, sir."

"You'll get a whipping."

"I won't. I won't either."

"You know there's a law in this town against carrying weapons," the slender man with the cigar said. "You know you're supposed to check your guns at the saloons, the hotels, or here?"

"That's right," the bigger man said. "You're supposed to check your guns when you come into town. How long you been in town?"

"Just two or three hours."

"And he hasn't checked his gun, Wyatt!"

"Give me your gun," the tall man said.

Mica walked over to the desk and handed Wyatt Earp his gun. His feet felt wooden. "You're wearing guns," Mica said.

"I'm Deputy U.S. Marshal. Doc Holliday here's my deputy right now. We're upholding the law. We got a right to ours." The man at the desk handed the gun to Doc. "Some gun, huh, Doc?"

"It's a beauty, all right, Wyatt. Wonder if he'd want to trade?"

"Ask him. He'd be a fool if he did, though."

Doc pulled one of his ivory-handled Colts from its holster. He held it alongside the wooden gun.

"Want to trade, boy?"

"No—no."

"What do you think of that, Wyatt? He don't even want to trade. What do we do with a boy like that?"

Wyatt shrugged. "I don't know."

"Here's a fellow comes barging into the Marshal's office to disturb the deputy U.S. Marshal himself, and his deputy, while they're both hard at work, a fellow who we know has disobeyed his mother in coming here, a fellow who's been carrying a deadly weapon around town for three hours.

I tell you, killing's not good enough for such a man." He threw Mica's gun back to him. It fell on the floor. Mica picked it up and put it in his belt.

"All right, pardner," Doc said kicking his legs off the desk flat and hard on the floor. "Start your draw. I'm slapping leather right now."

Mica saw the long, slim fingers start down for that gun which had already killed countless men. His own fingers, stiff, aching, reached for his own. His hand slipped off the handle. Then he had the wooden gun drawn at last. Doc's gun was just clearing his holster. "Pow! Pow! POW!"

"By God! he got ya, Doc," said Wyatt. "Drilled ya plumb through."

"He did, didn't he," said Doc, coughing now from the exertion, till his eyes watered up in his pale face. "Did you see that action, Wyatt? Reminded me a little of Wes Hardin, or Clay Allison maybe."

"Looked more like old A.J. Dunit's style to me."

"Why, Wyatt, look at that boy. I believe he's blushing."

The two men laughed.

Mica's face was crimson with pride and pleasure. He had outdrawn the great Doc Holliday!

"Aw, I bet you let me win."

"I did not. Did I, Wyatt?"

"You won fair and square, boy," Wyatt said.

"Come here, boy," Doc said now, "you want to see Wyatt's gun?"

"Yes."

Doc reached over and pulled one of Wyatt's guns out of its holster.

"See that barrel. Twelve and one-half inches long." Mica stared. It was the longest pistol barrel he'd ever seen. "Five inches longer than mine," Doc said. "Wyatt believes in giving these gunslingers a real head start."

"Doc, I can draw that just as fast as I can a standard."

"I don't believe it. Never did. I believe you like it because you can put a better head on a man with it. Here, boy. You want to draw against Wyatt? Prove my point?"

"No—no sir!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to, Mr. Holliday."

"Leave the boy alone, Doc."

"Oh, Christ! Wyatt, let's go eat. This boy tires me. I need a drink."

"I told Virgil we'd wait."

"Why don't you go pistol whip some little girl, boy," Doc said, "like the rest of these fellows around here?"

"I don't like little girls."

"That's what I mean. Beat 'em up a little."

The deputy U.S. Marshal smiled. He pushed his papers aside. "Hear tell your Maw's getting married."

"Yes sir."

"Who's the lucky one?"

"Travis. Travis Malabar."

"Oh, yes, yes. That young fellow down the valley. Good man."

"Is he one of Clanton's cowhands?" Doc asked Wyatt. Wyatt shook his head.

"He isn't nothing," Mica said. "Can't shoot. Don't even carry a gun."

"Here, here, boy," the Marshal said, "man don't have to carry a gun to be a man. Guns can get you into trouble."

"That's what my mama says."

"She's right. You listen to your maw."

Doc grunted.

"Like Doc always did."

A thin, white-faced youth, a dark derby hat setting square on his head, entered the office without knocking. He carried a large twine-tied package. "These are the

ordinances Mr. Virgil had printed up." He addressed the man behind the desk.

"Thanks, boy, just set them on the desk here."

The boy dropped the package with great relief. "They's a couple of gents outside on wagons, says they want to see you."

Doc was already at the window. "Yeah," he said over his shoulder, "looks like you got some business, Wyatt. You better get the coroner on the way back to the paper, will ya, boy?"

Wyatt Earp rose and moved around the desk, his two long-barreled pistols low on his hips. He stopped for a moment in front of Mica. "That's right, son," he said, "you mind your Maw or I won't let you come back here again."

"Yes, sir."

Wyatt went outside followed by Doc and Mica. The boy in the ink-stained apron scuttled quickly away toward Hengelmann's store.

Almost the tallest man Mica had ever seen got down from the second wagon, untied the black horse hitched to the tailgate and mounted it.

"Dead man in this man's wagon," he said, nodding to the front wagon. "I did it."

Mica saw Emmett Graham then in the front wagon. "Hello, Mr. Graham."

Emmett Graham looked at him. Looked right through him. Mica turned back to the tall man with the great beard and ridged welts on his cheek and forehead.

"How'd it happen?" said the Marshal.

"Self-defense," the giant on the black horse said. "Wound's in front. He drew first. This man witnessed it."

Wyatt turned to Emmett Graham. "Did you see it?"

"I seen it." You could hardly hear Emmett Graham.

"Is it true what he says?"

"I reckon."

"The dead man drew first? Speak up, man."

"Yes."

Doc strode to the wagon and peered into it. He whistled. "Looks like one of Luke Storm's jobs, Wyatt, or maybe A.J. Dunit, the undertaker's friend. Right smack in the middle of the forehead."

Wyatt moved over to observe the corpse. Mica ran to the opposite side of the wagon and climbed up. There was a small hole in the man's forehead and his head looked funny with that bandanna on top of it. Suddenly Mica shouted, "It's—it's—Mr. Malabar! It's Mr. Malabar! Isn't it, Mr. Graham?"

"It's Mr. Malabar!" Mica said again, still unable to believe it.

"Damned if it isn't!" said Doc. "That crazy peach farmer. Well, what do you suppose—?"

"Don't I know you?" said Wyatt, swinging down from the wagon and looking up at the tall, welted man on the big black. "From somewhere?"

"Maybe you do. Maybe you don't."

"What's your name?"

"Bowie. Bowie Malabar."

"You kin to him?"

"He's his son," Mica said. "Like Travis is. I heard talk of him. He's his son!"

"Easy, boy," said Wyatt.

"Boy's right," said Bowie.

"You sure he drew first?" Wyatt said to Graham, nodding at the dead man.

"He drawed first."

Wyatt Earp shook his head.

Doc tugged at his arm. "Isn't he the one they wanted to know about in Cheyenne?"

"You been up Cheyenne way recently?" Wyatt said.



"Maybe."

"That's it," said Wyatt. "Got in some trouble up there? Maybe?"

"News travels fast," the tall man said laconically.

"Been riding hard, haven't you?"

"Two weeks."

"Sheep." Wyatt wagged his head in disbelief. "Ten days ago I got the whole story on you from the Marshal's office in Cheyenne. Telegraph."

"Have they got a warrant for me?"

"No."

"Why do they want to know where I am?"

"Don't you know? Don't you really know?"

"Reckon, maybe I do."

"Shepherd!" Doc said contemptuously. "You're one man whose shoes I don't ever want to be in."

The Marshal shook his head again, searching the tall man's face. "I swear, Doc, it goes back further than that. Bowie—Bowie—name like a knife—well, I reckon I do know you. Eight, nine years ago. Salt Fork, wasn't it?"

"Maybe."

"Buffalo. Sure. Doc, this is the Texas kid that won the speed shooting on the Salt Fork in '72. Outdrew every buffalo hunter there."

"Outdraw you, Wyatt?"

"That day he did. I remember. Sure I do. I won rifle for accuracy; he won pistol draw and accuracy. Bowie Malabar. Named after that knife. Sure, I remember this boy. Why'd you come down here, Bowie?"

"Had a duty to perform."

"I reckon you performed it?" Doc said.

"I did."

Mica's eyes were round, bulging. His mouth hung open. He was not so familiar with death that it failed to shock him. Old man Malabar was lying dead in the wagon with

a bullet in his head and these men were clucking over him like hens, talking of shooting and drawing and paying the corpse no more attention than a plank of wood lying up to dry there in the wagon.

"He's dead! Mica screamed at them. "Mr. Malabar's dead. He shot him!"

"Shut up, boy," Doc said. "Self-defense."

The man called Bowie took a rifle from the second wagon and rode forward. He handed it to Emmett Graham. He reached in his pants pocket and brought out a roll of bills. He peeled off several and gave them to the Marshal. "See he gets buried proper," he said. He stuffed the rest of the roll back in his pocket. "I'll be moving along now," he said quietly, locking eyes with Wyatt.

"I reckon you'd better stay till the coroner gets through. There'll be questions."

"This man can tell you all you want to know." He stared at Emmett Graham until Emmett looked away. "I'm in a hurry."

"Where you think you're going, sheepherder?" Doc said.

"I know where I'm going. Cheyenne. Back to the sheep. You can telegraph them I'm coming back" He wheeled his horse.

Wyatt laid a restraining arm on Doc Holliday. "Never mind, Doc. We got a witness. All right, Bowie," he said softly. "I'll tell them. You can be sure of that."

Bowie nodded briefly. "So long, Marshal."

Down the street a cloud of dust marked a small crowd advancing on the wagons. Bearded miners, bowlegged cowhands, silk-clad, feathered women, men in string ties and brocaded vests—quietly, quickly they came on. One woman was hurrying along awkwardly in front of the rest.

His mother might be in that crowd, Mica knew. If she

was he'd get a whipping. But he didn't move. He could see the red hair of the woman running

In a moment she was upon him. "Mica! Mica!" She swept him to her. She was sweaty and flushed and she was crying.

"Mr. Malabar's dead, Mama. He's dead. He shot him. His own son shot him."

"Who—who, Mica?"

"That man. That one!" He pointed to the man on the black horse.

"Murderer!" his mother screamed. "Someone stop him! Somebody give me a gun!"

"Mama! Mama! It was self-defense. Please, Mama!"

Doc Holliday came over to her, removing his hat. "It's all right, ma'am. It was a fair fight." He patted the boy's head "He's a good lad, ma'am. He wasn't in the way."

His mother's face was full of a hate Mica had never seen before. "Murderer!" she shouted after the departing rider. He turned once to let his flat, expressionless gaze travel over her, then spurred his horse and headed north out of town.

An old, bent-backed man in the crowd touched the Marshal's arm. "Saw Ike and Billy Clanton and Frank McLowry just ride into town."

"Were they armed?"

"Yes."

"They know better than that. Come on, Doc."

"It's out of your jurisdiction, Wyatt," Doc said. "It's a job for the town marshal and you know it."

"Virgil just deputized us. Get a badge inside, Doc, and let's go. Hengelmann," he addressed the old man in the black hat, and thumbed the wagon, "he's all yours."

"Anybody see it?" the old man asked.

"Him," Wyatt said, indicating Emmett Graham. "And

Graham, don't you leave till the coroner there says you can."

Mr. Hengelmann moved close to Zoanna's side. "I'm truly sorry about this, Mrs. Wade," the old man said, sweeping off his dark hat.

"Sorry!" She dried her red, swelling eyes. "Sorry! Tell that to Mr. Malabar."

"He don't need it, ma'am," the old man said quietly. "More'n likely he's found his peace now."

"Peace?" Doc Holliday said, moving off with the Marshal, not even looking back. "In hell?"

"Not hell!" said the old black-hatted man sharply to that taut, thin back. "Hell's here!"

"Come, Mica." His mother bent down for him. "We have to get back to Travis. Quickly!" Without looking up she spoke to the old coroner. "I didn't mean to rile at you, Mr. Hengelmann," she said. "Didn't mean nothing."

The old man tipped his black hat again. Slowly he started the long climb up the wagon to the dead man.

As long as he lived Emmett Graham would not forget that afternoon at the bottom of Pick-'em-up Grade. Would not forget William Malabar staggering backward under the impact of the bullet, his hat pitching off his head and rolling on its brim down the dry wash till it settled on its crown, the grotesque neckerchief flattened against the man's head by his own sweat as he lay crumpled in a lifeless heap on the desert floor, a small round hole in his forehead; the tall, sweaty, dirt-grimed man with welts on his forehead and cheek standing over him, gun hanging down loosely from his right hand, left wrist pressed up to his mouth, palm outstretched.

Emmett Graham whipped his mules viciously. He had a long way to go before he was home, and the stars were

already out. The night was strangely fresh and cool; still Emmett Graham felt his shirt grow wet on his back.

Why had the man chosen him? He could have had only a few moments at most to observe him through those glasses before he stepped out onto the road to halt him. Could it have been pure coincidence? He tried to believe that, but he couldn't. Then why? Why in God's name had the man chosen him?

Emmett Graham licked his thin, cracked lips. The sweat oozed clammily into the palms of his hands.



TRAVIS MALABAR drank his whiskey slowly. He sat alone at a small table against the cool adobe wall of Gib Ray's saloon and spun his web of old dreams. He cradled his head now on the hard top rung of the wooden chair, his eyes closed.

He was back home in Texas. He was a small boy again, lying out at night with Bowie and looking up at the stars. Bowie's eyes were strange and shiny as he told him breathless tales of the courage and heroism of Sam Houston, James Bowie, Davy Crockett, the Mier prisoners, Fannin's men at Goliad. Bowie said, "We're not bounty jumpers like Mama's brothers; we're not Northern sympathizers like Paw. We're Texans like Houston and the rest and one day we'll be like them and do like them." Coming back to the house later that night they'd been whipped by their father because they'd stayed out so long. Curled up against one another in bed Bowie had vowed to Travis, "One day we'll be like them! I swear it! You too, Shug. No one will ever whip us again. I'll see to that . . ."

It was his seventh birthday and Travis' eyes were bugging from his head after the raid on their house the previous night. Bowie said, "We're making us a real Sam Houston souvenir. Don't look so scared, Shug. This Indian's dead." Bowie laughed. "You and me, though, we aren't dead. Are we, Shug? I'm never going to die," he said,

hacking away at the bloody Indian head. "Just live forever and then turn into an old white mule. You too, Shug. I'll see to that." It was later, down by the river where Bowie was boiling the skull, that their father finally discovered them. "You sacrilegious monster!" he yelled and lashed out with his hand striking Bowie into the dirt. Bowie rose, his thin face jowly with rage, and stood in front of Travis. He was just twelve years old. "Don't you hit him. It wasn't his fault . . ."

At school they called Bowie "Beanstalk, shadow, needle-dick." He was continually fighting his own tormentors as well as grinding the faces of Travis' enemies into the dirt. He said to Travis, "Learn to use your hands, Shug. Stop reading your Bible so much and learn to take care of yourself. Pick up a rock or a club if you can't use your hands. People know you won't fight back, they'll never let up on you. I won't be around forever to help you, you know." Travis said, "You fight your way, Bowie, let me fight mine," and then added slowly, "Thanks, Bowie." Bowie smiled suddenly. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll be around . . ."

He was eleven and Bowie sixteen the night their father came home drunk after their herd had been run off by the Jayhawkers in southeastern Kansas. In a sodden rage his father had struck their mother, Bowie, and even Travis. Bowie drew his gun. He said, "You ever hit her again, I'll kill you! Him too—" he indicated Travis—"I'll kill you!" The others stared wide-eyed, unbelieving, at Bowie. Slowly sheathing his gun, Bowie said, "All right, I'm leaving again. Come on, Shug. You better come with me this time." His mother cried out, "No! Not Travis." His father said thickly, "Damnit to hell! I'm sorry, boy, I didn't mean nothing." Travis said, "I'm not going. I'll—I'll be all right without you, Bowie . . ."

And finally he saw Bowie standing in the draw, tall



enough to block out the sun, his father in front of him, in his gunsights at last . . . Bowie was saying, "No one will ever whip us again. I'll see to that . . ."

Travis Malabar drank more whiskey. He emptied the bottle. He was caught neatly in the web, each strand of ancient memory lashing him more tightly to the formidable figure of his brother.

The afternoon sun lay a yellow bar along the hard-packed earthen floor of Gib Ray's saloon. Men walked through the open doors, out of the light into the cool shadows at the long bar. They huddled in small groups along the edge of Travis' reverie and ordered their whiskey and made their small talk. Some wore spurs, some did not. All wore guns. They were ranchers, townspeople, dark-eyed, homeless cowhands. They looked at Travis Malabar. All but the cowhands he knew well. When he nodded to them the men did not acknowledge him. They glanced away quickly and sought their whiskey glasses.

He wanted to tell them all how much he liked them. How he wished they liked him better. He wanted to explain to them why he never wore a gun. Why he didn't believe in violence. He wanted to tell them how much he loved this wild, beautiful country, with its harsh thorned cactus, its golden grass, its stark, bald, hog-bristle mountains, its rich red earth. He wanted to tell them to accept him as he was, not to remake him in the image of what they thought he should be. He was sure they'd understand now. But he was afraid, too, he'd fall down if he stood up.

The thunk of the stamp mill by the river was steady and persistent in the low-ceilinged adobe saloon. Outside in the single street of Charleston, an ore wagon creaked, roiling dust through the open doors as it passed.

Scattered fragments of the men's conversations at the bar filtered through to him. "Joe Gormand and Leland Wright . . . The Ranchers' Committee . . . organize

. . . wipe out the thieves and rustlers once and for all . . . old man Malabar . . . old man Malabar . . . old man Malabar." It came at him first as a whisper, then louder and louder like a surf roar, with no attempt made to conceal the distaste in their drink-charged voices.

Travis Malabar drank from a fresh bottle. He didn't like the whiskey. He'd only had one drink before in his life. That was on his twenty-first birthday. His father had made him take it. He hadn't liked it then. He didn't like it now, though he'd been drinking steadily since early morning.

It's wrong, he thought. Drinking's the wrong way to fight anything. Still it made you think more clearly. Or maybe it kept you from thinking at all. He was puzzling this one out when young Billy Clanton swaggered into the saloon. He was wearing freshly greased boots, high gray Stetson, clean blue neckerchief. The young dandy was obviously sporting, probably on his way to Tombstone.

"Rye," young Billy said in a loud clear voice to Gib Ray. He drank it neat and quick and ordered a refill. He looked idly around, spotted Travis. "Well, well," he said, hooking his thumbs into his gun belt. "If it ain't the Widow Wade's man." He laughed a stuttering youth's laugh. "Some man, eh, boys?" No one at the bar supported him. He turned back to pick up his whiskey.

Anger moved slowly and unexpectedly across Travis' broad face, coloring the roots of his straight brown hair.

It was said that the Clantons gave sanctuary to the desperate men fleeing from the law in other states and territories. Maybe, maybe not. But the only ones who weren't missing any stock these days were those on friendly terms with the Clantons. It enraged Travis now to think of Zoanna having to butter up this hot-headed, pimple-faced, nineteen-year-old pipsqueak, pretending she liked him in order to protect her stock.

Young Clanton wheeled and cocked a high-booted heel

on the low brass rail. He wasn't going to let it alone. He filled one cheek with a hunk of tobacco. A half-smile twisted his thin lips. "What she sees in you," he said softly, "I'll never know. Some man!"

Travis stood up clumsily, knocking over his chair. He picked it up slowly, the blood rocking to his head. "I'm a man," he said thickly. "Man as you."

"Are you now? Are you now? Sugar and spice and everything nice. A man all right. A sawdust man," Billy Clanton whinnied.

Travis advanced unsteadily toward the bar. Billy Clanton straightened, his right hand instinctively slipping to his side.

"He ain't got a gun, Billy," someone said.

"I know he ain't," Billy said swiftly. "What's the matter with you? I ain't going to gun him. He ain't going to do anything, any way. We all know him."

Travis stopped, bewilderment on his square, open face. "You stay away from Zoanna now," he said. "She's promised." The whiskey was coursing madly through his blood. His face felt on fire.

"You got her branded yet?"

"You keep your courting to those houses in Tombstone."

"Oh ho! The sawdust man is threatening me now. Are you, sawdust man?"

"I'm a man." He looked for confirmation from his countrymen at the bar and received none. "I'm a man."

Billy Clanton snickered. "Your Paw wasn't much, but maybe he was a man. He died like a man anyway. Your brother, they say he's a man. But you, we know you, you can't fool us."

He stared at the sneering, sharp-faced youth, taller than himself but not so husky or thick-shouldered. The men at the bar knew what a hard-case Billy Clanton was, yet they

glared at Travis now with eyes of contempt, eyes of pain, eyes that pleaded with him. Plead with him for what? All the sins of man were reflected in those faces. Did they want him to redeem them somehow? He couldn't even redeem himself.

"It was self-defense," he answered those faces. "The law said it was that. When you live by the law—"

"Self-defense?" Young Clanton spat a streak of tobacco juice onto the earthen floor. "How good was your Paw with a gun? And how good was your brother? I hear he was one of the best. Self-defense! Don't make me laugh!" He laughed mockingly.

Travis staggered and caught himself. He felt sick to his stomach. "Thou shalt not kill," he said. "Thou shalt not kill."

"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Don't it say that in your Book too? Your Paw's body two days cold, you slopping up whiskey. How many of us would let our Paw's body lie bitter and cold. There's an unwritten law as well as a written. Some man!"

There was absolute quiet in the barroom. The whiskey-reddened eyes of the men were hard and unrelenting. The pounding of the stamp mill grated loudly across Travis' raw nerves. He moved a hand before his bloodshot eyes. The corded slab of his neck was scarlet.

Shamed by this young, pimple-faced dandy! Shamed in this house of sin. Twenty-five years of Tumbleweed living brought to this. Where is my humbleness now? He stared wild-eyed at Billy Clanton. The whiskey, the taunts, the events of the last two days had brought him up against a blank wall. There was no humbleness in him now. He knew what he had to do. And because he knew, an anger such as he had never experienced before suffused him. Somewhere deep inside he exploded with uncontrollable

bitterness. He did something he was wholly unprepared for. He attacked.

He dove straight ahead, bulling his shoulder into Billy Clanton's stomach, driving him back hard against the bar. Billy was too surprised to move out of the way of that wild charge. Now gasping for breath he sent his hand sneaking for his gun. Travis' own big hand clamped over his. Travis wrenched the gun free and flung it far across the room. Billy smashed his fist into Travis' face. Travis didn't step back. He had young Billy by the neck and one leg. He was hoisting him up, propelling him through the door, flinging him far out into the street. Billy's new gray Stetson hat rolled crazily in the dirt and came to rest against the hitching post.

Travis roared back into the saloon. Two cowhands hit him as he entered. His knees buckled but he came on, licking blood from his split mouth. He bashed one man in the belly with his head, knocking him down. He hard-shouldered two other men out of the way.

All around him men were cursing him now, reviling him with every obscene word they'd ever hurled after spooky mustang or stampeded cow. He didn't know how to fight, how to use his fists properly, so he used them like hammers, swinging them up and down, taking three blows to get in one himself. He was sick and bleeding. Men were falling about him, rising, falling again. Now even the ranchers and the townspeople, men he thought he could call friends, or might one day call friends, came at him, cursing him, hitting at him. There was the same madness on them. He was the sacrificial lamb. He didn't care.

A chair staggered him. He hung to the bar for support. A bottle flew past his face and shattered the mirror. He struck out blindly. From the rear a bottle crashed down squarely on his huge head. He was going down. As he fell

he felt the blows still raining down on him. He was on the cool earthen floor. The stamp mill was beating insanely in his head. His tongue hung out of his swollen mouth. It lay in stale, drying tobacco juice. He couldn't get it back in.

His head ached and his whole body felt peeled raw and deeply bruised as he rolled over into the wet squishiness of the bed, smelling the strong, dried, fermenting stench of his retch. He sat up, head throbbing, eyes bursting in the sunlight that streamed through the open door. His mouth tasted of old rotting rhubarb.

"All right, Travis," the woman said, "I'll get you coffee now."

He focused on the figure rising from the chair beside the bed. Reddish hair, wide, fair face with tiny freckles over the nose, large full mouth.

"Zoanna!" he called weakly after the departing woman. He rolled to the edge of the bed, shaking the sickening fuzziness out of his head. He was in cotton long johns only. His other clothes hung neatly over a chair by the bed. He put on his pants and sat back down quickly, unable to continue.

Zoanna returned with a hot steaming cup of coffee. "Drink this," she said, "and set over here at the table so I can get shet of these blankets and sheets."

Seated at the table Travis said, "I'm sorry about that bed."

"It's all right. It'll wash out." Expertly she bundled up the foul sheets and blankets. "It's you I'm worried about," she said, giving him a curious look as she went out the door.

The coffee scalded his tongue and stomach and his bruised fingers shook as he held the large white cup, but he was beginning to feel a little better by the time Mica and

the Mexican hand, Appolonio, came lurching through the front door with the heavy cream cans.

"Morning, Travis," Mica smiled. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Awful, Mica. Sorry I did you out of your bed."

"That's all right." The boy seemed actually happy about it.

They put the cream cans in the kitchen and Appolonio glanced obliquely at him as he left the house.

"You knocked down five men, Travis," Mica said excitedly. "Broke one man's jaw, too. Didja know that?"

"I did?"

"Sure." The boy grinned.

"When?"

"Last night. Don't go away, Travis, I'll be back soon and tell you all about it." He ran after Appolonio.

Travis looked down at his skinned hands. He felt his swollen jaw, the great lump on his head.

"More coffee?" Zoanna asked, re-entering.

"How'd I get here, Zoanna?"

"Mica and I picked you up in Charleston last night and brought you here. How else?"

"Did I get in a fight? Mica said—"

"I reckon you did. Picked a fight with Billy Clanton and almost twenty others in town." Did he imagine there was a tinge of pride in the way she said it?

"I did, huh?"

"Here's a bill from Gib Ray's saloon to prove it." She pulled a slip of paper from under the sugar bowl on the table. "Three broken chairs, one broken table, one-quarter section back-bar mirror broken. Total: \$29.50."

"I'm beginning to recollect it."

"I reckon you've done enough drinking these last two days to last you a lifetime. Well, haven't you, Travis?"

"I guess I have."

"No amount of drinking's going to change anything." She shook her head in evident distress. "It isn't like you, Travis."

"Zoanna." He took her sunburnt, callused hand and held it gently between his two big ones. "I would like some more coffee and bring a cup for yourself. I think we better talk."

He managed to get on his shirt and boots while Zoanna was in the kitchen.

"All right, Travis." She stood by the table, that curious, perplexed look on her face.

He got up and walked slowly around the table till he was almost directly behind her.

"I love you, Zoanna," he said.

"Is that what we're going to talk about?" she asked.

"Don't josh me, woman. I'm serious."

"I'm not joshing you, Travis." Her voice was a trifle softer.

"I figure I must be the toughest-hided critter God ever put on the face of the earth." He placed his hands lightly on her shoulders and felt her shiver under them. "I don't see how you ever considered to marry a fellow like me."

She laid her cheek back against his big, skinned hand.

"Shush, Travis! You're kind and sweet. You're a good man."

He laughed sourly. "No one else seems to share your opinion." His fingers dug hard into her shoulders. "I'm good with the earth, Zoanna. I'm of the earth, like Bowie is of the sky. I've got my faults. More than enough for all of us. But with the earth I've been good. Zoanna, I want to live the rest of my life in this valley, raise my family here, raise cattle, and raise my father's peaches too, if they'll grow." His hand lifted and sank back into the soft flesh on her shoulders. "You know what they think,



Zoanna. I'm the biggest fool in the whole San Pedro Valley. That's what they think. Yesterday afternoon that Billy Clanton started it! That young pipsqueak of a killer!"

"Billy Clanton!" she said, contemptuously.

"Yes, and then the others started in." He shook his head. "They knew what happened to Paw down in that draw two days ago. The coroner's jury said self-defense, but they know just like I do that Paw was no gunslinger, that he was gunned down. Killed in cold blood by my brother. Bowie! Dear Lord God. Zoanna, they called me every filthy name they could think of. No one in the whole place said a word for me, even spoke up for me. No one! You understand that?" His fingers were pulsating in a steady, clutching rhythm on her shoulders.

"Right now, to them I'm the least excuse for a man in the whole territory."

"It doesn't matter what they think, Travis," she said. "We don't need them. We don't need anybody but ourselves."

"You're wrong, Zoanna. Good or bad, we need them. A man can't live without neighbors. If they're bad we have to make them good. If they're good it's a sin for us to live on the outside. Without self-respect we can't expect to get any respect from anybody else. Like my mother always told me, it's a long way through life without respect. Well, this morning I haven't got much respect for myself."

She rose from the table and clasped her arms around his back. "Travis—"

"No, wait. I've always believed that life was love, marriage, the chance to raise a family decently." He sounded tired and old. He spoke slowly. "To do that proper a man's got to stop some place and rest a while. You can't do that by letting your brother shoot your Paw. I found that out yesterday afternoon. Zoanna," he breathed deeply, "I figure we'll have to postpone the wedding."

"No! I won't do it."

"It's got to be. We'll get married when I get back."

"When you get back! You aren't going after him? You aren't that much of a fool! You talk about love, marriage, raising a family decently! Isn't there any other way than fighting for it with fists and guns?"

He shrugged listlessly. "I thought so once. I just don't know now." He paused. "Maybe it'll only take a week. He's just two days ahead of me. Maybe a month. Maybe longer. Maybe I won't be coming back. I've thought a lot about that, too."

"God Almighty, no! Not you, Travis. A baby—a baby going after a killer."

"Maybe. Maybe I am a baby, a twenty-five-year-old baby, but he isn't any killer. One thing Bowie isn't, he isn't a killer. I don't understand it. He should have seen me first. Or afterward, anyway."

"Leave it alone. It's not your affair! Good God! leave it alone." She was beginning to cry now. "You know he must have had a reason, Travis."

"He had a reason all right. Bowie never did anything without a reason. Likely he figured it was a good reason. Maybe I'm responsible for that, too." He frowned. "Bowie's been gone too long. Lots of things he doesn't know now." The anger slowly left his voice to be followed by bewilderment. "Even as a kid he and Paw never got along. There was five years difference between Bowie and me, and at that age five years means there's a lot of things going on you don't understand. I thought I did; maybe I didn't. Bowie had his violent spells all right, but he was never a killer. He's been gone too long, Bowie has." He stopped a moment, his wide brown eyes puzzled. "Something's undone Bowie. Getting mixed up with sheep up there in Cheyenne—that's another thing. Can't understand that either. He used to hate sheep just like all the rest of us."

Bowie's gone wrong, real wrong, I reckon." He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "Out there too long hunting a handful of stars. I wonder can that crazy a man?"

Zoanna had choked off her tears. She said, pleadingly, "Nothing you can do will bring your Paw back."

"I know that," he answered softly. "Maybe I can bring myself back."

"Bring yourself back? Travis, I don't understand you."

"It doesn't matter," he said quietly. "I'm sorry to bother you with this, Zoanna."

She shook her head furiously. "We could leave this valley. We don't have to live here."

He stared at her. He'd left too many places already. He ticked them off in his mind, Austin, Matagorda, Galveston, Tucson, Tombstone.

"I'm sorry, Zoanna," he said helplessly. "I'm really sorry."

"You can't even handle a gun!" she screamed at him. "You can't shoot!"

"Maybe Bowie *will* kill me. I don't know. But if I didn't go after him you'd wish he had killed me before it was over, and I would too." He forced a smile. "I remember as a boy those Catholic Fathers in Tucson teaching us that the Lord said, 'Turn the other cheek.' I've tried that way, Zoanna. I thought I tried hard. Now I'm going to town and have a will made up. If anything happens to me the place'll be yours. Yours and Mica's."

She threw herself on his chest, beating at him, tearing at him.

"You won't go! You can't!"

He gripped her flailing hands in one of his and caressed her soft red hair with the other. "Zoanna, there comes a time in every man's life when he's got to decide what he really is. Before, between Maw and Paw and Bowie I never had much chance. Now, thanks to Bowie—thanks to

Bowie! . . . You know, Zoanna, this morning was the only time I really felt that Mica didn't object to me. I was surprised what a real difference it made."

"All right, then! Goddamn you, go! Get killed!"

"Goodbye, Zoanna." He released her slowly.

A small dark shape tumbled through the sunlit door.

"You going now, Travis?" Mica said. "Really going after him?"

"Mica, you been listening outside again?" Zoanna said.

"Of course not," he lied. "He was headed north out of town when he left, Travis."

"Thank you, Mica."

"Travis," the boy began bashfully, "Travis, I'm glad you're going."

Zoanna moved swiftly. Her hand splatted against the boy's cheek.

"Glad, are you? Are there so many decent men in this valley they can go and get themselves killed for madness? Get out of here, boy! Get out of here before I lace you good!"

The boy's eyes clouded. He turned quickly so they wouldn't see the tears slant across his cheeks. "I'm glad anyway," he gulped, and ran out of the house.

Zoanna slumped into Travis' arms. "I'm sorry, Mica," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

"I love you as my life," Travis said. "Understand this, Zoanna. I don't know much about women." His face reddened. "Never have. But I love you. I know that. I'm sorry we got started that way—the way we did."

"Don't talk about that," she said hoarsely.

"I've got to—now. I did wrong to you, great wrong. I've been chewed up inside something awful about it these last weeks. I don't want you to feel obligated to me because of that."

"I'm not, you—you fool."

"You don't have to marry me—ever."

"I *want* to marry you, Travis. I've wanted to for a long time."

He bent down and kissed her awkwardly. She leaned hard against him, her fingernails sharp in his back, her cheeks and lips hot, salty with tears.

Abruptly she pulled away. "Stay here tonight. Leave tomorrow." She lowered her eyes. "I'll send Mica over to the Murphys to stay."

Gently, sadly, he lifted her head to look at her.

Her whole body was trembling. "I love you, Travis. I love you. I really do!"



BOWIE MALABAR carefully rubbed the warm, melting tallow into the gall sores raised on the big black's sides.

"Easy, General; there, boy," he said, as the hobbled horse reared its head from the grass it was nibbling by the bank of the creek. The bruised flesh, chafed raw by the rifle and shotgun he'd been carrying, stretched and shivered under Bowie's long fingers as if stung by a huge fly. "Easy, boy. Sorry, General. Wish I had to do this to a man, not you. Easy, boy." He rubbed the velvet muzzle. "Won't be much longer, General. Not much longer, boy."

The black crow hopped forward under a tall cottonwood, browsing again, and Bowie bent down and washed his hands in the clear, cool water of the creek.

Bowie climbed back up the bank to the shade of the rock cave he had found at the base of these juniper-clad hills. He stretched out again, his head resting on his hat. It would be another two hours before it would be dark enough for him to ride again. Below him in this small cup between the hills, the creek made a pleasant tumbling sound over the rocks in the hard, hot sun. A man could fall asleep to that. He gazed straight into the sun and blinked his eyes rapidly. Now was no time to be getting careless.

Since he'd left Tombstone he had been riding for three nights. Not as hard and fast as he could have, but carefully,

at any rate. He was not very familiar with this desert mesa country and he'd been following the shelter line of the eastern mountains, just as he had coming in, holing up in a protected spot near water and grass in the daytime.

One more night's ride and he should be well out of this Apache country and it would be safe to ride days again. He knew if he had pressed hard, as he should have, he would have been well out of hostile country by now. It disturbed him vaguely that he had not.

He laced his hands behind his head and stared out through the rock shadows to the top of the cottonwood pushing up against a pale blue skillet of sky.

Somehow he had expected his father's death to release the poisons that had been piling up in his system for much too long. That it hadn't, disturbed him more than vaguely, but not so much as the concentration he had been giving the matter the last three days. That was unusual and puzzling, and he didn't like it.

He had a strong urge to smoke. He resisted it. He had not made fire in three days. He stirred restlessly on the hard earth.

His father's words came digging at him again: "All right, Bowie. All right, Bowie." They were almost the last words his father had spoken to him. And the first time in his life he had ever called him Bowie.

They hooked into him like long sharp porcupine quills, festering slowly, as they had been these past three days.

Ever since he was eleven everyone had called him Bowie. Everyone except Paw. Why had he called him Bowie *then*?

It was as if he just suddenly gave up, Bowie marveled. Gave up completely. After all these years. Or it was like he was finally admitting his guilt, his responsibility. This last idea satisfied Bowie better and he tried to cling to it.

Up till the moment his father called him "Bowie," he



had planned to shoot him right square in the belly. The belly was easier to hit, would draw out the dying, give more pain, and he'd wanted him to suffer with a pain in his belly like the one he, Bowie, had been carrying around all these years.

That his intention had been so suddenly altered puzzled Bowie. When he'd received Travis' letter and started down here to Arizona his intention had been hard and strong. More than once it had faltered and weakened on that wild eight-hundred-mile day-and-night ride from Cheyenne. More than once after the first few days, when the shock of his mother's death had lessened, he had felt tempted to turn around and go back. Fourteen days is a long time to wait and nurture the kind of deed he had to perform. But when his intention softened, to sustain it, he had marshaled his fury and his reasons and they had been strong and many so that by that time he'd arrived here his resolution was stiff with backbone again.

It was not any genuine sorrow for his father's death that bothered him. He knew that. That was only justice. That was inevitable, it had always been inevitable.

He sat up quickly. The disturbance, the irritant, was, of course—Travis. Travis, the clumsy, sunny-faced, little kid who liked sugar cane so much everyone in Texas called him Shug. Shug, who was now big enough to be getting married. Of course, Shug was grown up. He was thirty so Shug must be twenty-five now, and yet to him Shug had always seemed just as he seemed now, an awkward, gentle, squat, guileless, broad-necked youngster in continual need of help and protection. He had always had a tremendous affection for his younger brother because he himself was so much bigger. It had sometimes embarrassed him, this awe that he instilled in Shug because he could do so proficiently all the things Shug couldn't do when they'd been growing up together in those good days in Texas. From this unmit-

igated hero worship had flowed an understanding that demanded no speech, no statement. Whatever either did was right and was understood automatically by the other with no questions asked.

Yet Shug was no longer Shug. Shug was Travis. Travis was twenty-five and getting married. Too many years had passed. He was still Bowie, Bowie the protector. But Shug was no longer Shug.

The peculiar thing was he couldn't remember thinking once of seeing Shug when he'd ridden down for his father. He was bent on doing just one thing. And getting back as fast as he could.

His Paw had said that Travis didn't hold the old man responsible for his mother's death. Bowie didn't believe that. It was another of his Paw's lies. Still Travis had been with them all those years that Bowie hadn't. Travis might not rile very easily sometimes, but he had enough gumption to get out if the situation became too unbearable. Yet he'd stayed all these years.

Bowie's left wrist came up to his mouth. It rested there uneasily. How must this look to a community who sees a man's father shot down by his eldest brother? A community that doesn't, that couldn't, understand? How would they look at the brother who stayed behind? What would they expect of him? What would the woman he was to marry think?

He might not see Travis again for several years, maybe never; he sure didn't want any ill-feeling hanging between them that might one day turn to hatred. He wanted Travis to understand. Maybe Travis didn't understand at all. Bowie twitched uncomfortably on the hard earth.

Yet he *was* in an almighty hurry to get back to Cheyenne. An almighty hurry.

According to the Marshal back there in Tombstone they

were already searching him out in Cheyenne. They were using the law to do it but they weren't going to use the law on him. He understood that. The law couldn't punish him enough for what had happened in Cheyenne. He knew what they would do. They had enough money to do almost anything. He was not afraid. He would handle it when he came to it. He would make it easy for them. He was going straight back there. He couldn't help it.

It was the old sheepman that drew him, an old loyalty he could not turn aside from. The old Basque wasn't responsible for what had been done that night, but the old man had been with him, and so if they were looking for Bowie, they were probably looking for Old Cayo too. He was guilty by association, if nothing else.

That night they'd come running out of the Cheyenne Club and before he headed south, he'd told Old Cayo to get out of town, to get quick, to take all his sheep, or what was left of them, and start back to California as fast as he could.

He sure hoped Old Cayo had taken his advice, but Old Cayo could be a stubborn old fool. If he had been this time, he was probably a dead fool by now. Bowie had to go back to see, and to help if he could. He couldn't leave the old man alone against them, after all he'd done for him. Still, Bowie reasoned carefully now, it had taken him two weeks to make this trip. It would take him at least two more weeks of hard riding to get back. Well over a month.

If the old Basque was still there, he was beyond anyone's help now. If he wasn't, he was safe, at least for a while.

Bowie rose slowly. The sun had dipped behind the big cottonwood. He thought suddenly now of this mother's grave. He hadn't even seen it. He hadn't even had a chance to lay a single flower on that cold dark earth.

Limply Bowie's wrist dropped away from his mouth.

Mica caught the midafternoon sun in the old cracked hand mirror and focused it on the rear window of the small frame house along the tree-shaded San Pedro River a mile below him. His forehead beaded with sweat as he nudged the mirror a fraction of an inch to the left and then to the right. In the bedroom of the house below there was a large mirror on the bureau opposite the window and if he worked his piece of glass properly and struck the window his signal was sure to be seen.

Where was Paddy? Even if he wasn't in the house he was supposed to look up here every once in a while. He began to become a little irritated with Paddy Murphy. He swung the glass back and forth faster.

Table Top Rock was the highest point along the low line of hills that ran parallel to the river, and from here he could see for miles up and down the grassy valley. His own house was clearly visible two miles above Murphys' toward Charleston. Both Malabars and the Grahams were further south toward Lewis Springs where the Clantons had their big spread.

From here he could even see Barbacomori Creek, a pale sliver of water rising out of the Huachucas and feeding into the San Pedro. Along its course were many small ranches, and the peaches of old Mr. Malabar, that were the talk of the whole valley.

Mica fidgeted. There was still no movement around the Murphy house or the corral, or behind the house either. Paddy was fretting him. Maybe he would get a new best friend. He had still not really forgiven Paddy for telling his mother about the Indian tracks at Lewis Springs. At least Paddy could have told him first what he was going to do.

He really would have preferred his best friend to be less chicken, like Thurm, or Utah Tote maybe, whose Paw ran cattle and was a real cowhand, Mica was thinking when he

suddenly detected a movement in the clearing by the corral of the Murphy house. Someone on horseback was coming out of the yard. It was the old fat bay mare, Paddy's horse, all right. God! he was a slowpoke.

Mica placed the old piece of mirror deep in a crack at the rear of the high flat rock on which he sat. It was a place only he and Paddy knew about. He sat down again and watched Paddy come slowly through the heat haze and up the rise of the valley to Table Top Rock.

Paddy Murphy tied his horse to the mesquite at the base of the cliff, next to Mica's, and slowly clambered up to the top of Table Top Rock. He was out of breath when he finally made the summit, his round face very red.

"You heard anything from Travis?" Paddy asked.

"Nope."

"Not yet? He's been gone what—five days already, Mica?"

"I reckon."

"Thought that's why you signalled me." Suddenly Paddy seemed disappointed. "You think Travis'll get him?"

"I think so."

"Paw says Travis'll get kilt sure. Paw says Emmett Graham said that brother of Travis is as cold-blooded a killer as he ever saw. Travis will get kilt sure."

"I reckon he will."

"Paw says he didn't think Travis would go after him. Maw says she's glad he did, says she's sad for your Maw though. Wedding 'n all off now. Says they's no woman in these parts needs a man as bad as she does. What do you reckon she means by that?"

"I don't know."

"You reckon she means your Maw needs a man to do her like we seen Appolonio doing to that Mexican girl down at the river last spring?"

"Naw, not my Maw."

"Well, why does your Maw need a man worse'n any other woman?"

Mica thought of swinging at Paddy, except he wasn't talking as if he expected him to.

"Because she's a widow, that's why, and I need a father."

"Oh. I guess that's it. Excuse me a minute, Mica." Paddy clambered down the back side of the rocks. He returned in a moment. He sat down gingerly.

"Sure been sick. Must 'a been that salt pork. I seen Curly Bill and Johnny Ringo in Charleston other day, Mica."

"You did?"

"Yeah. They sure looked big and mean. You shoulda seen their guns! How many men you figure they kilt between them? Ten? Twenty? You think they killed Joe Gormand and Leland Wright?"

"I seen Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday last week."

"You did!"

"I guess they killed a hundred men between them."

"Maybe two hundred."

"I drew against Doc."

"Aww!"

"I did. I beat him, too."

"Didja draw against Wyatt Earp?"

"No."

"Whodja think'd win, him or Doc, if they drew?"

"They wouldn't draw."

"Why?"

"They're friends, that's why. Best friends."

"Would you draw against me, Mica?"

"No."

"I wouldn't never draw against you, either. Listen, I think that's Maw ringing the Indian bell for me." They could hear the faint clanging of a triangle far below. "I reckon I'd better go. Sure don't feel so good."

"If you feel better give me a signal tomorrow."

"All right, Mica. Is Billy the Kid better?"

"He's all right now."

"You want to fight tomorrow? Murietta's ready. I'll bring a tub, so they can't get away. All right?"

Mica shrugged. "All right," he said. He tried to sound disinterested.

Paddy slithered down the rocks. He waved once, mounted, and rode slowly back down toward the river. Mica watched him shrink to a small speck.

Away off to Mica's right far beyond his own house, a long cone of dust roiled up by the ore wagons and freighters hung over the Tombstone-Charleston road. Far off the trail winding south along the river a small blob of dust formed and curled larger through the sand and sagebrush. He saw it grow into a solitary rider proceeding along the cliff line.

Now that Paddy had gone, he decided to circle around and see who the rider was so far off the trail and why he was traveling such an odd route. He didn't want to go home right now. Since Travis had gone away five days ago, it had been different around the house; his mother was distant, cool, strange, stranger than he had ever seen her. It made him uncomfortable being around her.

He climbed down from Table Top Rock, mounted his own horse and followed the line of boulders and hills that curved in toward the trail three miles away. He was on the backside of the hills and so was able to see the rider before the rider saw him.

He was so tall Mica's heart almost stopped. Riding the big black horse, dusty, dark clothes, heavy beard, welted face. Name like a knife! Mica thought. Bowie! It's Travis' brother!

He turned back before this giant of a man could see him, his heart a drum in his chest. He retraced his tracks, using the hills as cover between himself and the rider. When he

finally turned out at the end of a long sweeping ridge the tall rider was waiting for him, pistol in hand. He slid it back in his holster when he saw Mica.

"Boy, you following me?" His giant's face was expressionless.

"No—no, sir."

"Don't ever do that again, boy. Sneaking up on a man can be mighty dangerous. You hear?"

"I wasn't following you, honest!"

Mica saw a faint smile crack the dark bearded face.

"All right. Git then!"

"You're Travis' brother, aren't you? I saw you in Tombstone."

The man looked at him with the most direct and blankest eyes Mica had ever seen.

"I remember." There wasn't the slightest trace of a smile left on that face. "Git!"

"Is he dead?"

"Who?"

"Your brother."

"Travis? What're you talking about, boy? Where is Travis?"

"D-don't you know?"

"Isn't he at the ranch?"

"I don't know."

"Where is he?"

"Didn't you kill him?"

"Where is he? Boy!"

"I don't know. I don't!"

Swiftly Mica spurred his old mare away. He flew across the sand and brush toward his house as fast as the sorrel would take him. Somehow, he knew now, he possessed vital information and he had to pass it on to someone, quick.



“Boy, come back here!” hollered the man. “Nobody’s going to hurt you. Want to talk to you.”

But Mica did not turn back. When he’d almost reached his house he finally looked over his shoulder. The giant was a thin black tower against the sky, plodding slowly down the ridge toward the Murphys and the Malabar ranch five miles away.



ZOANNA WADE stopped ironing her wedding dress. She set the iron on the edge of the table and carried the stack of freshly ironed clothing to her bureau and Mica's smaller one, where she neatly tucked them away.

She went to the kitchen, strained the water from the large kettle of boiled potatoes, and left the potato settlings on the sink to cool.

The ashes from the stove she carried outside and poured into a sloping V-shaped wooden trough. She scooped rain water from a barrel at the corner of the whitewashed adobe house and poured this over the ashes. The leached fluid ran off into a huge crock at the end of a narrow wooden flue. The crock was almost full. There was enough lye in it now to make soap and hominy grits for the next two months. She continued to make lye.

When she'd poured the last of the ashes into the trough and leached them she went back inside the house.

She brought the kettle of potato settlings into the main room and set it on the table. She dripped the starch onto her crisp white wedding dress, and for the third time began to iron it.

She worked slowly. When she had finished she held it up and draped it around the faded blue calico she was wearing and looked at the picture she made in the mirror. Then she

folded the white dress gently, and placed it by itself in the bottom drawer of the bureau.

The afternoon sun cast long shadows through the thick windows of the adobe house. Briefly she thought of lighting a lamp and then discarded the idea. She walked listlessly to the small desk in the far corner of the room. She took out the blue-line account book and stared at the dim figures.

There was money in the bank. Not much, but there was some, as there had never been before Reuben's death. However, there was no warmth in the figures. No flesh-and-blood warmth. She flung the book down on the desk and paced the room.

Finally she stopped at Mica's bureau, and rummaged through the drawers. She took out Mica's finest shirt, his white Sunday church shirt, stiff, shiny, unwrinkled. She sprinkled water and potato settlings on it. She began to iron again.

When she was almost through she paused and rubbed the small of her back with her right hand. Heavily she dropped into the chair. The pain was back. The saguaros were back. Probably for good. There weren't second chances for a lonely widow woman with an eight-year-old boy in a valley like this. There weren't that many good men in this valley. It had taken her two long years to get this one to ask her. Another two years trying to win someone else would be a hell she couldn't face. Her cheeks burned with the salt tears that ran into the corners of her mouth.

In her own mind Travis was dead. She blamed herself for this. If she had only controlled herself, if she had just remained calm, she could have talked sensibly with him and shown him all the sound reasons for him not to leave and pursue this wild and fatal course.

She knew what kind of a man Bowie Malabar was from

what Travis had told her. He wasn't the proud, spirited figure Travis imagined and admired so greatly. He was a brutal, cold-blooded gunslinger like so many others she'd seen who found the only answers in their guns. This she firmly believed. If Travis found him, if Travis provoked an argument, if Travis in his madness drew—Bowie Malabar would not hesitate. He would kill his brother as he had killed his father. Only a miracle could save Travis.

She wiped her eyes angrily with a broad fleshy forearm. Travis was dead. Face it. The pain and the saguaros were back for good.

With effort she rose. She stood rod-stiff, and turned slowly to complete the ironing of Mica's shirt, when she heard the horse's hoofbeats pounding across the desert.

A cloud of dust sprayed through the door as the rider reined up in front of the house. Mica raced in, panting.

"He's here, Mama!" the boy shouted. "He's back!"

"Close the door, Mica. The dust, Mica!"

He slammed the door.

"Now, who's back?"

"The tall man. The man with a name like a knife. Travis' brother."

"Travis' brother?" She felt her face stiffen.

"Yes, Mama!"

"You must be mistaken. Travis' brother?"

"I been telling you, Mama! I ran into him by Table Top Rock."

"Travis—?"

"He hasn't seen him, Mama. He doesn't know where he is."

"How—how do you know, Mica?"

"He asked me where Travis was, that's why. I think he came back to see him. He's headed toward the Malabar ranch."

"When did you see him, Mica?"

"Just a couple of minutes ago. He was following the ridge. What're we going to do, Mama?"

"What're we going to do? We're going to do nothing. What can we do?"

"But, Ma—"

"All we can do is wait, Mica. We can't do anything." She was surprised how cold and distant her voice sounded. How calm. She was glad she had cried now. It had drained her of emotion, left her head clear and hard to think, and she was thinking rapidly now. She knew exactly what she had to do. This was the miracle. It would save Travis' life. And hers too. If she got there in time.

"I'm going to follow him, Mama."

"No, Mica! I—I have a chore for you."

"Mama!"

"Julio forgot to take the butter this morning for Quong Kee. I want you to go into the cellar now, get five pounds of butter, wrap it carefully and take it into Charleston immediately. Put it in the saddlebags so it doesn't melt. Do you think you can do that for Mother?"

"You want me to ride into Charleston alone and deliver the butter?"

"That's right, Mica. I think you're big enough now, aren't you?"

"Sure, Mama!"

"Hurry then. Stay along the river under the trees where it's cool, and don't run that old mare. She'll be pretty tired from that run you just gave her."

"Yes, Mama."

"And don't waste any time around town. I want you home before dark."

Her heart was still pounding strongly when he set off for Charleston. Quickly then she went to the corral and

saddled her horse. There was no one around. Julio and Appolonio were still in Tombstone making deliveries. Returning to the house, she took down the rifle from the deer-foot rack, checked to see that it was loaded, took an extra box of cartridges from the cabinet, and belted a long, sharp skinning knife around the waist of her old blue calico dress. There was no time to change clothes.

She crossed the San Pedro River at a low muddy ford below the house and rode south along the bank as fast as she could. She passed the Murphys' spread on the other side of the river, and then two miles further upriver, half-way between the Murphys' and the Malabars' house she forded the river again. She spurred her mare for the tail end of the ridge dipping away from Table Top Rock.

She tied the horse deep in a mesquite thicket behind the ridge and shinnied down into a jumble of large, naked, scoriated boulders that shelved the base of the ridge.

Behind a group of rocks she carefully selected a vantage point that concealed her, yet offered a perfect view of the valley floor below, as well as unobstructed vision in both directions along the ridge that paralleled the river.

She was beginning to tremble again. She might be too late!

Straight ahead of her now, the sun hulked low and blinding above the San Pedro. To her left, further south along the river, the whitewashed adobe of the Malabar house gleamed faintly between the two large cottonwoods in the front yard. And still further south, barely visible six miles away, a thin haze hung over Lewis Springs, where the indistinguishable specks that were cattle made a tiny brown ring around it as they drank.

But she kept her eyes fixed right, to the north. She saw a rider distantly take shape. She wasn't too late! He was coming slowly along the ridge. Slouched forward like he

was sleeping. By the route he was taking he'd pass within fifty yards of her before he'd make the slow descent to the ranch.

She was shaking harder now. Her palms were wet with perspiration. She checked the rifle again. It was loaded. She was ready. She watched him approach, watched him grow bigger and bigger. He *was* a big man.

Now the shakes were suddenly gone. She was no longer sweating. She felt cold and nerveless. She had killed men before. They had all been Indians, she could make believe this was an Indian. Worse than an Indian. For the only time in her life she was glad that Indian tracks had been seen near Lewis Springs.

The man stopped. He reached down for his canteen. He tilted it up for a drink. He was facing toward her, and she saw the ugly welts of flesh on his cheek and forehead.

Slowly, carefully, she sighted the rifle.



PART TWO

**A QUEST**



BOWIE MALABAR carried anger in his belly like a great lump of green sourdough. It wouldn't digest and it would not pass out through his bowels.

Ever since he could remember the anger had been there—when he was a boy in Texas wrangling horses, roping cows; during the Civil War when he was still a boy too young to fight; after the war when he grew into a man trailing cows up the Chisholm to Abilene, Ellsworth, Hays, Wichita, Dodge; when he was hunting buffalo on the Salt Fork.

And finally that night in Cheyenne three weeks ago when the sheep killers had come after Old Cayo's sheep—that same day he'd received Travis' letter that his mother was at last dead.

His anger had seemed to come to a head that night, focusing on the sheep killers who had destroyed most of Old Cayo's herd, and on the two big Wyoming cattlemen who had been behind the hired killers. That men of their stature in that territory could misuse their power, to wound and kill helpless animals and sheepherders, galled him murderously. At least they would be carrying his seal for the rest of their lives.

Bowie Malabar had been revolving this twisted thought in his lonely mind when he discovered the boy trailing him.

Momentarily, and violently, the anger had flared again in his throat when the boy had fled.

What am I, he wondered, an animal? Something to be feared and hunted by everybody, even a little boy?

The boy had seemed terrified and he knew something about Travis. It was damned strange. What had the boy meant when he'd asked if Travis was dead, if he had killed him? Had Travis gone out searching for him? Impossible! Yet . . .

Grimly he struck along the rock ridge toward the ranch. He would find the answers there soon enough. The boy's frightened face stuck in his mind. *An animal!* An animal to be feared and hunted! Even by little boys!

He had chosen this route along the ridge in preference to the trail by the river below because he did not wish to be seen. He wanted to talk to Travis, reach an understanding with him as soon as possible, and disappear as quickly and unobtrusively as he'd come. He knew he would not be welcome in this valley now. If he'd had any doubts about this they had been dispelled by the boy's attitude. The people here didn't know the truth between him and his father. They would judge the death on its face value only. It would be harder for Travis, for Travis' marriage, if he were seen going toward the ranch. But the boy *had* seen him. The boy would tell somebody. Bowie's jaw tightened.

The afternoon sun seared his shoulders and he kept his horse moving in the shade of the big rocks along the side of the ridge whenever possible. It was good grassland he could see down below him. Fine, nutritious grama, curing up waist-high in a sun as hot as the inside of an airtight. Plenty of water in the river. Sycamores and cottonwoods along the banks for shade. Plenty of springs too, Travis had written. Real choice cattle land. Not overstocked and overgrazed like so much grassland Bowie had seen this last year.

The black horse plodded slowly among the round, bald rocks in the fanout at the end of the ridge, and Bowie let

the weary horse have its head. To his right far below he could see the twin green cottonwoods that shaded the low rectangular adobe house that had been his mother's.

Suddenly, inexplicably, a shiver curled along his spine. Something was not right. General shuffled ahead slowly. General! The big black had sluggishly pricked his ears, just as he had when he warned Bowie of the boy trailing him. Somewhere near there was another horse. Bowie listened. There was no sound except General's slow plopping hooves in the dust. The other horse was halted or tied very close by. Slowly, imperceptibly, Bowie's hand tightened on the reins, slowing his tired horse still further. Bowie slumped forward, lowering his head, feigning fatigue and drowsiness. It was a posture he affected when he was most vigilant. Sometimes you could fake a careless opponent into a false step, into overconfidence, if you appeared completely unaware of his presence. Without moving his head, out of the top of his eyes and to both sides, Bowie's glance darted swiftly. This fanout of rocks he was in was an ideal spot for a bushwacking if that's what a man had in mind.

The chill shivered his spine again. He was being watched, he was sure of it now. It was like the sixth sense of animals who live too long with the earth and the sky.

There was another white human presence, maybe more, somewhere in these rocks. To his left probably, where the rocks were higher and gave more cover as they sloped into the ridge. His eyes rolled back and forth under his shaggy hooded brows, roaming the rocks.

Was that a foreign glimmer of light he'd just seen up there? Or was it just sunlight streaking on rock he had not noticed before? Or had someone moved suddenly, dropping a bar of reflected light into a vacated space? Or could it be sunlight on a gun barrel?

Slowly, so that it seemed the horse stopped of itself,

Bowie increased the tension on the reins until General came to a halt. Lazily he reached down for his canteen. Lifting it to his mouth he turned his head casually up and to the left toward where he'd seen the suspected flash of light. He drank hungrily and water dug a furrow down his chin, as he stared right at it.

He had just started to roll off the big black on the far side when he felt the hot bite chunk into his left shoulder driving him hard off the horse. The accompanying explosion reverberated deafeningly among the jumbled rocks.

Bowie fell on his side and rolled over once in the dirt, then lay stone-still. Blood flowed sticky and wet along his shirt. His hat lay near the fallen canteen dripping water into the gritty earth.

At the sound of the gun General had bounded forward and was now waiting fifteen feet in front of the fallen Bowie. Silently he cursed the horse for leaving him without cover. He was sprawled in a small open patch among the rocks. He didn't know how seriously he was hurt. From the feel of it he wasn't in too bad a shape. Probably only a flesh wound in the shoulder. They couldn't kill him. No one could kill him. He swore again.

He didn't dare move now. There could be more than the one who had just fired. If he tried to scramble away, and there were more than one of them, they would make sour goat hash out of him.

If they thought he was dead they might leave him. They might throw another shot into him, too, to make sure. He lay quiet, tensed, waiting for the shock of that next bullet ripping into him. He was as exposed here as he'd ever been in his whole life.

The skin was crawling right off his body. Then he controlled his fear as he'd always been able to control it. He asked himself, would Sam Houston have died like this? Or Crockett, or Bonham, or his namesake, Bowie? Had any of

BOWIE watched Compadre tilt heavily on his good right leg. For a moment he thought he was going to fall. The Mexican reeked strongly of chili, garlic and bear grease. He stood too damn close. It couldn't be helped. One thing, he worked swiftly and efficiently. He cleansed and swabbed the wound now with boiling water and hot towels. The bullet had passed through the rubbery shelf of flesh on the left shoulder. There would be less trouble from this wound than the cuts on his face and back, the short swarthy Mexican had told him.

Bowie sat stiff in the iron-runnered rocking chair in the gloom of the adobe house, wincing with the sear of each application of the burning towels. The sun, sinking behind the hills, bathed the adobe in shadowy cool dusk.

Earlier he had explained to the Mexican he had received this wound in a fight in Charleston. Compadre had nodded. He had asked no questions. He had said he was taking care of the spread while Travis went seeking him. The Mexican was not glad to see him.

Now the gimpy-legged Mexican bandaged the shoulder with broad strips of clean white muslin. "Almost finished, *señor*," he grunted, spraying another blast of chili and garlic at Bowie.

The table next to Bowie was laden with dirty tin dishes, greasy with half-eaten food. The wooden sink in the

kitchen was filled with still more dirty, greasy dishes and a thick film of red crawling ants. The thin jerka rug over the puncheon floor was heavy with dried mud, scraps of paper, old bread crusts, a rusted jar top. There was dust on the sideboards, on the table, the old sewing machine, the brass bedposts. A spider was stringing a net between two of the heavy wooden beams that supported the low ceiling. An empty whiskey bottle lay on its side in the fireplace.

The sour musty smell of greasy food and old dirt was everywhere. It roiled heavily and nauseously in Bowie's nostrils, mixed with the rank, bear-greased Mexican head that hovered over his torn shoulder, spewing its vile stream of garlic breath out at him.

"Doesn't anyone ever clean this place?" Bowie said.

Compadre shrugged. "It has not been cleaned too well for a long time."

"Doesn't your wife help clean up here?"

"She cleans the bunkhouse, cooks for the *vaqueros* when there is cow work to be done." Compadre shrugged again. "We are paid only thirteen dollars a month. For fifteen dollars we would help. That is what I told your father. He wouldn't pay it. All the money goes for his peaches. His peaches! Ahh! He was mad, your father. They will never produce, those peaches."

He wrapped the muslin around Bowie's chest and under the armpit and tied it there.

"Why?" said Bowie.

"I told my wife." The Mexican gestured broadly with his hands and arms. "If they bear fruit, these thieves and rustlers, these *malos hombres* who are everywhere now in this valley, they will come like the wind and break every tree, branch by branch. *Sí, señor.*"

"Their reason?"

"It is simple, *señor*. They do not want ranches all along the creek. If the peaches should bear, and God only knows



if they will, and if they should make money, everyone will soon be raising peaches and then where will the grass be for the cattle? Ehh, *señor*? Phffft! Gone. Covered with peaches or something else. Ahh. He was mad, your father. I told my wife. That is not to say I approve of the way he died. No! Nor is that to say I disapprove either." He smiled cunningly. "Who is to judge, *señor*? Who is to judge? There, *señor*, the shoulder is fixed. I will change the bandage for you again, tomorrow. Soon it will be like new." He limped away toward the door.

"Tell your wife to come in here and clean this mess up. I'll pay her extra."

"It is all right, *señor*. We will clean it this time. No charge. It is the least we can do. God wills it. We are not angry with anyone. Anyone."

When Compadre had hobbled away to the bunkhouse Bowie buttoned up his shirt. From the table he picked up the picture that he'd set there when the Mexican started to work on him. It was a metal-framed ambrotype of his mother and father on their wedding day, standing straight-backed, side by side, his mother in a white, high-necked dress with a great train, his father in a plain, black sack suit. He stared at the picture and rocked slowly, the iron runners groaning rustily across the puncheon floor.

The people in the picture did not seem like his parents at all. He could never believe his mother had ever been this young, this stout-bosomed, her face so free of lines, her eyes so shiny. His father, too, had never been that young, so thin-faced, serious, sure. These people were complete strangers to him.

Occasionally Bowie would glance up at the round portrait of George Washington hanging over the fire-blackened iron kettle in the fireplace. He looked at it because here in the long, cool shadows of dusk it reminded him of home and earlier, pleasanter days, before the cough had

come to sag and wither his mother's ample bosom and tightly drawn spirit. But even Washington had dust on him.

How many times, Bowie wondered, had his mother boarded and packed that picture away to be hung again in a new and unfamiliar place? How many times had he and Shug stood in front of it? How many times had his mother marched him before it and said, "Bowie, you swear you're telling me the truth?" And he'd always said, "Yes, ma'am."

"You wouldn't dare lie now, would you?"

"No, ma'am."

"You'll never lie, will you, Bowie?"

"No, ma'am." And he never would. Not for his life, in front of George Washington. Or anyone else either. He was a Texan.

He stared now at the picture in his hands. His eyes misted and scalded with hot tears. The only person in the whole world who'd ever understood him, who'd given him relief, who'd given him anything but pain, was dead. He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his dirt-grimed blue shirt. The squeak of the iron runners ceased. Bowie rose from the rocker still holding the picture.

"I've killed Paw," he addressed the stench and dark shadows of the large room. "I raped my brother's woman. They're hunting me from Cheyenne. Shug's out gunning for me here. Mama, I'm at the end of the line. Rotten seed? It's a lie! But where is it? Where is the lie, Mama? Where is the lie in it?" His voice soared. "Where is the lie that made it all go wrong?" His balled fist pounded the table. "Where? Where?" With a sudden savage movement he swept all the dishes to the floor. They clattered rolling toward the fireplace. His gun was out, smoking in his hand. He stitched four shots into the portrait above the fireplace. Glass shattered, splintering down on to the floor. George Washington was dead, half his face torn away.

Bowie panted brokenly. "Where!" he whispered. "Where, God, where?"

There was a rapid knocking at the door. "*Señor, señor!*" the voice called. "Is everything all right? *Señor—*"

Bowie flung the door open. The dark, grease-slicked Mexican stood there leaning awkwardly on his good right leg, his wife just behind him. She was fat as a shock of wheat, her black hair hanging to her waist. Her black oily eyes did not conceal the fright in them, as her husband's did.

"We heard the noise, *señor*," Compadre said. "We thought—"

"Come in!" shouted Bowie. "Come in here! Open all the windows. The doors. Everything! Clean this damn smell out of here. Get it out. Get it out! It's foul!"

Compadre stumped into the room. "Come, Juana," he said to the woman. "The doors, the windows. Open them. *Pronto. Pronto! Sí, señor.* The smell in here *is* bad. Very bad."



TRAVIS first smelled it four days after he'd left Cheyenne, traveling east with the buzzards as the sheriff had directed him. It was faint and light, and it stained his skin. The fifth day it was so strong and overpowering the roan gelding he was riding laid its ears back in shock as if the stench had turned to pure terrifying sound. Travis veered south, then north. There was no escaping it. Beyond that ridge ahead of them ten thousand men had died on this Wyoming battlefield and had never been buried. So it seemed. He took no food that day.

On the sixth day, under a fat, broiling sun in this buzzard-clouded, high mountain sky, he tipped the ridge and stared at the valley below and the lush green grassy meadows gentling up the dark shadows of the mountains to the forest line. The tainted air struck him full like a sudden, fierce, summer wind devil. His face burned and prickled under it.

His imagination hadn't been far wrong. It was a battlefield.

Humped in the lupines and meadow grass as far as the eye could see were gray, swollen, maggot shapes, white skeleton bones, dry bloodied carcasses. Sheep. A thousand. Two thousand. Maybe more. In the gorge far to his right were more gray, bloated bodies lying on top of each other, mounting the cliff slopes to the very sky.

Like pepper shaken from a giant pepper mill, the buzzards dotted each carcass. Occasionally they backed off clumsily and hit the sky as the sleek, paunch-heavy timber wolves slipped out of the trees and sniffed over the long-dead remains. Travis counted over thirty wolves, then stopped. The sky was black with angry, circling birds.

He started down into the valley, skirting the gorge. The roan balked. Travis spurred him into movement through the grassy graveyard. The vultures fanned back out of their way. The horse was wild-eyed and spooky and Travis tight-reined him. "I don't blame you, boy," he said softly. "I don't blame you."

The sheep they passed had had their skulls smashed in. Travis turned away from them. He fixed on that clear space just below the tree line. There were no gray, misshapen bodies there. Only a small low teepee.

Travis dismounted and led the horse toward it. He was sweating now and his face was blanched.

It was about three feet high, a crude latticework of saplings crisscrossed and staked into the ground. There were bodies inside. Two dogs he could see. A sheep. And a fourth figure looked like that of a man.

Travis' stomach dipped and rolled with queasiness as he approached this evil structure.

Bowie? he wondered. Hope flickered in him briefly and then pierced him painfully. "Not Bowie, dear Lord!" he said. "Not this!"

He peered through the hatchwork of the saplings. It wasn't Bowie. It was an old man. What had once been a powerfully built old man judging by his size. His beard was white and one ear was severed and missing. His eye sockets were small round holes in his head. His whole swollen body heaved and billowed with maggots. One hand lay extended gripping a shepherd's staff, displaying a great, green-stoned ring on a finger the size of a sausage.

Suddenly, staring at the two moldering dogs, Travis knew this must be the man of whom Bowie had written with such fondness—Old Cayo. But why? What terrible sin had he committed to bring this awful fate upon himself? Who had built this strange cairn and placed him here with these symbols? An odd tingling arched the skin on Travis' neck and the back of his arms.

Carefully he looked about. He was fifty yards from the tree line of the mountain. On all other sides the grassy meadowland sloped down to the valley floor. There was no sign of human life anywhere. Yet his whole skin was goose-pimpling on him. He felt sick again. Vermin crawled through the cavity that had once been a man's ear. He steadied himself against the low sapling structure. Strain and apprehension were spooking him. He wasn't used to this wild animal feeling. With a terrible effort he forced himself to concentrate.

Whoever had built this strange cairn had built it for a purpose. To keep the wolves and buzzards away? Probably. From the looks of the man, the outstretched hand and ring, the dogs, whoever had built it wanted this man recognized a long time after he died.

Quickly then, Travis reviewed his visit with the sheriff in Cheyenne. He recalled the strange way the sheriff had acted when he'd entered his office six days ago.

"You know a man named Bowie Malabar?" Travis asked him. "Tall man, maybe six feet six, welts—"

"I know him," the sheriff said abruptly, a large fat man with droopy seal-brown mustache. "Why you want him?"

"I'm his brother."

"Brother?" The sheriff was startled. "What for you want to see him?"

"My business."

"Well, he ain't here," the sheriff said angrily. "Ain't nowhere in the territory."

"You know a man called Old Cayo? Runs sheep."

"I know him." The fat man was looking at him queerly again.

"Where can I find him?"

The sheriff shook his head. "He don't know where your brother is."

"I'd like to see him anyway."

The sheriff eyed him a long moment. He scratched one shaggy arc of his mustache. "Maybe he'd like to see you too," he said at last. "Brother, huh?"

Then the sheriff told him how to find Old Cayo. The directions had been confusing. The sheriff told him to head east toward the uplands and after three or four days to just follow his nose. He'd thought the sheriff was using a cattleman's derogatory reference to the smell of woollies, and Travis had left it at that.

Travis peered again at Old Cayo in his bough-bent crypt. Travis was breathing hard. His skin tautened and crept along the back of his arm. The sheriff had known about this. Known about it and been angry about it. Then why had he said, "Maybe he'd like to see you too?"

"Malabar!"

Travis stiffened, the hair bristling on the top of his head. Was he hearing things too, now?

"Malabar!" It came louder, from the fringe of the trees. Travis probed the deep green screen of pine and fir. He could see nothing but the dark, close trunks of trees.

"You seen enough, Malabar?" The voice was small, boyish, faint with humor. "You kept me waiting a long time, Malabar," the ghostly voice chided him. "Now slow and easy, Malabar, no sudden movements. You take your horse and lead him just the way you're facing. Slow and easy, now."

Travis stood transfixed.



"Now, Malabar! Now! You kept me waiting long enough!" The hardening words jolted Travis into movement. He stumbled once, then plowed slowly through the grass toward the line of trees. He heard no sound except the crunch of his own boots on fat grass. At the tree line he stopped. He could see no one. He could hear no one. It was uncanny. He stepped slowly into the cool blue shadows.

"That'll do," the voice said.

Travis jumped. He couldn't help it.

The voice laughed. "Easy does it, Malabar. Easy now." The voice slipped quickly from behind the broad trunk of a fir. The first thing Travis saw was the rifle pointed at his stomach. Then the man. The voice's owner was a small, slim man no more than five and a half feet tall, binoculars around his neck, buckskin pants, buckskin shirt. He was wearing moccasins and two Colt .45's set low on his narrow hips.

"Stand still now, Malabar. Hands above your head. That's it. Don't stir a muscle now." The man's eyes were set too close together in the pinched boyish face, crater-pocked by childhood disease.

Quickly the little man circled behind Travis. He took Travis' rifle from its boot on the gelding. Then, still from behind, and swiftly like a snake striking, he had the single pistol riding high on Travis' hip. He stepped back into silence. Travis stood rigid, scarcely breathing, hands high above his head. He heard the snick of a rifle bolt being drawn. He waited, numb, stricken, unbelieving. In the back?

After what seemed an eternity the little man said, "All right, drop the belt now." He was laughing softly.

Travis dropped his cartridge belt.

"Kick it back here."

Travis scuffed the belt backward with the heel of his boot. He heard the little man pick it up. Heard him empty the shells from the chamber of the gun.

"Six," he said chastisingly, then warily, "six shells!" Almost instantly, then, Travis felt the man's fingers slide across the beard on Travis' face. It was all falling into place now. His knees weakened with relief.

"If you're looking for welts," Travis said, "you can stop now. I'm not Bowie."

"I shoulda known," the little man said contemptuously. "The way you carried your gun so high. Six shells in it. Why, you ain't near tall enough. Big enough, but not tall enough. I reckon this goddamn stink has done looneyed my head. Well, who are you?" The little man stalked out in front of Travis, his long black hair swinging to his shoulders.

"Travis Malabar. I'm Bowie's brother."

"What you doing here?"

"I came after Bowie."

"Did you, now? Where is he then?"

"If he isn't here, I don't know."

"Did he send you? No," the little pock-faced man answered himself, looking Travis over quickly. "No, he wouldn't have sent you. Do you know who I am?" A half-smile played on the small man's thin lips. If he was disappointed he had gotten over it quickly. "Well, do you?" he prodded.

Travis shook his head.

"A.J. Dunit." The little man said it almost expectantly. He waited. "Don't mean anything?"

"No. Should it?"

"Depends on how you was raised," A.J. Dunit said sourly. "Now your brother, he'd surely know me. Here," he said wearily, lowering his rifle for the first time. He

threw Travis his gun and gun belt. "You ain't going to hurt anyone. I can see that."

Travis rebuckled his belt and slipped his gun back in its holster. "If I'd been Bowie, what would you have done?"

The little man in buckskin looked at him out of the oldest, tireddest eyes Travis had ever seen in a face so young. "Killed him," he said. "Naturally."

"In the back?"

"Back?" A shine of humor edged the dullness out of his narrow pocked face. "I was just testing you. Just funning you. No, not in the back. They hang men for that. Front. That's self-defense. I always give my man a fair shake. What do you take A.J. Dunit for, anyway?"

"What'd he ever do to you?" Travis said. "Just what?"

"Nothing."

"Then why?"

"Why? Money, boy. Money." He stopped for effect. "Three thousand dollars and expenses."

"Somebody's paying you to kill him?"

"Boy, you're slow. Where you from?"

"Arizona." Travis flushed.

"Is they all as slow as you down there? Sure I'm being paid. More than I ever got before. Your brother's a big frog in a big pond.

"I still don't—"

"He hurt a man's pride," the little man snapped. "Two men to be exact. He put his mark on their pride forever. That's a bad thing to do to a prideful man. Enough talk," he said curtly. "I can't stand this woolly stink here. Turns a decent man's stomach. Live ones is bad enough. You follow me. We'll get back to my camp."

Twenty minutes later, winding swiftly through the trees, the slim, graceful little man led them into a clearing of sharp, wind-eroded rocks by a little creek. A hobbled

horse nickered, welcoming the roan. High in the trees girlding the clearing Travis could see where a crude sleeping shelter had been recently erected.

"Wolves," A.J. Dunit explained bitterly. "All the wolves this side of hell in this valley now." The little man scrambled up to the top of the highest jumble of rocks. He put up his glasses and scanned the valley.

"Clear your horse and picket him," he called down to Travis, "then come up here and set a while. Nice and sunny. You can see everything."

"I don't want to see any more of that."

"I said—come up here!" It was spoken quietly but sharply, without lowering the glasses. "You don't lead easy, I'm going to have to break you to halter. Don't want to do that."

Slow chills were working their way again along Travis' back. He said nothing. He cleared his gear from the roan and racked it against a tree by the side of the cold campfire. He hobbled the horse and watched it begin grazing. He took a deep breath, and started up the rocks.

When Travis was seated beside him A.J. said mildly, "Don't cross me, boy. I don't get nothing for killing you." The little man was smiling. "Smells better here upwind, don't it? But damned if I don't believe that stink can work its way up through the wind. I must've lost ten pounds the first couple weeks I was here."

"How long you been here?" Travis said dully.

"You can call me A.J. Nigh on to four weeks now." He set the binoculars down. He eyed Travis curiously. "Let me ask you a question now. Why did you come way up here to see your brother? Huh?"

Travis looked beyond the trees at the valley grass and the bodies decaying there . . . Golgotha. "I come to kill him," he said.

The words sounded strange and unreal in his ears. To-

tally unreal now. As unreal as his getting drunk and fighting in that saloon back home; as unreal as those strange brave words spoken to Zoanna which had propelled him on this journey.

"I come to kill him." It grew no more familiar repeating it.

The little man gaped. "I'll be dipped in it! You! I don't believe it!" He was laughing again. "I'll be dipped! How was you going to do it? Talk him to death?"

Travis' broad face reddened. He laid his hand on his gun and hated himself for the insolent gesture.

"I'll be dipped! Give me that gun. Give it to me." Reluctantly Travis handed him his gun and A.J. emptied the chamber. A.J. handed Travis one of his own guns. "Empty it," A.J. commanded. "All right. Let's trade back. Now stand up. Back over there about ten feet. That's it. When I say, 'Draw,' you draw. We're funning now. We'll see how fast you are out of that high holster. All right. Draw! I said, 'Draw,' boy. We're just funning. This time, now. Draw!"

Still startled, Travis dug for his gun, heavy, thick hands slow and awkward in the unaccustomed movement. A.J.'s small, slender hands were swift, sure, a blur sneaking low to holster, easing gun up and out in one liquid motion. A.J. was laughing. "Again," he said. "Draw!" Travis fought his gun loose. "Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!" A.J. was saying, his Colt pointed right at Travis' belly before Travis finally pulled the trigger.

"Don't do that!" A.J. said sharply. "Never pull the trigger on an empty chamber. You want to ruin the firing pin, boy?"

"Again!" Travis said hotly, holstering his gun. "Draw!"

A.J. had his gun drawn. He skipped across the ten feet of rock and laid the barrel lightly alongside Travis' head before Travis cleared leather.

A.J. convulsed with laughter. "Never be mad when you draw. Stiffens you up in the wrist."

Again Travis said, "Draw!" This time he didn't go for his own gun. He watched the whip-strike of A.J.'s hand hit so fast he couldn't tell when his hand went down for his gun and when it came out with it.

Travis said helplessly, "I'm not used to this gun."

"I'll say you're not." A.J. reloaded his gun and holstered it.

"I just got it in Cheyenne."

"They musta seen you coming. No one's been using that Dragoon model for fifteen years." A.J. stopped. "Did you have a gun coming up from Arizona?"

"Rifle," Travis said.

"Rifle." A.J. shook his head. "How good are you with that?"

"Not very good either, I guess."

"You great big heifer of a man. I heard that Arizona's rough country. How'd you ever survive?"

"I'm a man of the earth, A.J. A mild man."

"But you're going to kill him, huh? You better spit him to death."

"Don't push me, A.J."

The little man suddenly smiled. He looked out over the trees. "Well, now, your skin ain't so thick, is it?" He was waiting for no answers. He was rapidly scanning the valley again.

"You serious?" A.J. said quietly now. "I mean about your brother?"

"I came after him, didn't I?"

"Don't make sense. Why does a man like you in one big frog's jump decide he's going to kill his brother? Or rather, I mean, when does a man like you suddenly decide he's tired of living?"

Travis shrugged his large hands. The sun had rimmed

the mountains. The wind spilling off the trees down the shadowed slopes was cool and brisk. "Why not?" he said, defending what little he had left of himself to defend. He sat down. "He killed my father, that's why." And then he was telling this crater-faced little man about the death of his mother and Bowie's return to the San Pedro Valley and the shooting of his father.

"I'll be dipped!" A.J. said without any humor when Travis was finished. "When? I mean, what day exactly did it happen?"

"July tenth."

"Yes," A.J. said thoughtfully. "He must have left here right afterward and ridden like hell to get there by then. The Marshal telegraphed us he left that same day. Did he?"

"I suppose," he said thinly.

"We figured he'd be coming back here."

"I did too."

"He musta loved that old man. To do what he did. Stinken, bearded, old sheepherder! I had to hold my nose while I shot him."

"You!"

"Of course. He was worth five hundred dollars dead. That's more than he was worth alive."

A.J. looked deeply into Travis' face and saw his shock and laughed. Hard and long. "This may be an interesting camp, after all," he said. "Let's get chow. We'll have no more visitors today."

Back down in the clearing A.J. built a low fire and reheated beans, biscuits and coffee. A.J. scooped a tin plate full and offered it to Travis.

Travis shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

"Don't blame you," said A.J. "Better have some coffee, though. Gets cold here." He poured coffee into two cups and handed one to Travis.

A.J. leaned back against his saddle and ate ravenously

while Travis warmed his hand on the tin cup. Occasionally he would sip of the bitter black brew. "Sugar?" Travis asked. Maybe he could get some of it down.

"No sugar," A.J. said. "This ain't the Cheyenne Club. Better have some beans."

"No thank you."

"You'll get over it in a few days."

"A few days? Am I your prisoner, A.J.?"

"Prisoner? What makes you say a thing like that?" The little man was smiling faintly around a mouth red with beans. "You got your guns, ain't ya?"

"You know what I mean. Supposing I want to leave to-night?"

"Supposing you do? Listen, boy, you want to find your brother? I do too. This is where he'll most likely come. I wouldn't miss your killing him for all the money in the world. Well, almost. What's the matter, don't you like me?" He was smiling broadly now. "We'll wait here. If he doesn't come soon we'll go after him. We've got lots of time, haven't we? Three thousand dollars and expenses." He smacked his lips. "Lots of time. I came all the way from California for this one. Laying up in a big house with curtains and rugs on the floor and that French bubble juice and three girls at my whistle toot." He rolled his dark shiny eyes at Travis. "You know why they sent for me?" he said slyly. "Hell, they coulda got others. Lots of them. Close to hand, too. You know why? Because I'm the biggest man with a gun in this whole country. Bigger'n Hickok, Hardin, Thompson, Allison, any of 'em. Me, A.J. Dunit!" He was talking as if he were drunk, then suddenly stopped, clearing his throat. "Don't mind me, Travis. I get to sweet-talking me because I'm about looney with the stink and waiting in this miserable place. I'm glad for company. Truth is, your brother is a big man with a gun. That's why they sent for me."



"Supposing I want to leave?" Travis came back to it again.

A.J. sighed. "I reckon you'll stay. That's the way it is. Besides, men like you have a habit of changing their minds. You might decide after all you don't want to kill him. You might even warn Bowie. I want to keep you here and keep your spirit strong. You see, don't you, boy? Besides I like your company." The smile rose and dipped in the cratered face. "You might improve my soul."

Later as they sat around the dying fire Travis concentrated on the flickering flames. Occasionally he'd glance at the little man having a last smoke, half-smiling, absorbed now in his own thoughts. Behind him, hanging loosely from the pommel of his saddle like a lariat, was a garland of what looked like dried apricots gleaming pinkly in the light of the fire. Once A.J. had caught him glancing at them and laughed softly. Now he just smoked. Travis wondered if he still smelled the stench of rotting flesh from the valley floor below.

"A.J.," he said quietly, not looking up from the fire, "if I'm going to stay with you a while you ought to tell me what this is all about. Why these people, whoever they are, want Bowie killed so bad."

A.J. blew a smoke ring in the air and stuck his finger through it. He slitted his eyes thoughtfully. "Well," he cocked his head, hesitated, then decided, straightening up. "You're bound to find out soon enough, anyhow." A.J. blew another smoke ring and sighed as if it were not a thing of pleasure.

It was the old story of the cattleman's hate for the sheepman. Of the two biggest cattlemen in the territory, Rawleigh Forge, president of the cattle association, and his partner LeMay Corril, expanding their free grass range up into the mountain slopes formerly used by the sheepmen. Forge and Corril had finally driven them all back

further west—all, that is, except Old Cayo, a stubborn old Basque who'd been grazing that free range for years en route to the Nebraska feed lots. At night a few of old Cayo's sheep were made off with, his dogs poisoned, even Old Cayo himself was shot at. He didn't move. More of his sheep were shot by night riders. Old Cayo rode into Cheyenne to hire outriders himself. Only Bowie would brave the anger of the cattlemen and go with him. For weeks Old Cayo, Bowie and two Mexican sheepherders dug in against the powerful cattlemen. One night Forge and Corril with more than a hundred riders descended on Old Cayo. They roped him and Bowie and tied them to a tree. The two Mexicans ran screaming away into the night. No one ever saw them again.

The men hired by Forge and Corril moved down the slopes of the valley and commenced beating the sheep in the head with clubs. When they tired of this someone remembered the gorge and they stampeded the rest in there. They shot Old Cayo's two new dogs, too, and dropped them in front of the tied up old man. When it was all over, the hired sheep killers ran off the old man's horses, took his guns and Bowie's too, and turned them both loose. They walked all the way back to town. They bought new guns. They marched into the fancy new Cheyenne Club upstairs to one of the small rooms where Forge and Corril were drinking and playing poker with some of their friends.

"I guess they didn't know what they was going to do until they got there," A.J. said, stomping his cigarette into the dirt. "Murder couldn't have been far from their minds. Anyhow, this Bowie, he hit Forge in the face, stunned him like. Took the bottle of whiskey on the table and broke the bottom end to it off. Then he ground the broken end into Forge's face making a jagged circle around his nose and mouth. Old Cayo held a gun on everyone so no one would interfere. Then Bowie did the same to Corril. They

say he was like a madman. There was more blood in there than in a Jayhawker's slaughterhouse. Well, then Old Cayo and Bowie, they both just turned on their heel and walked out.

"Forge and Corril they healed up, scabbed up. But they're marked for life. Ugly-marked. You never seen anything like it. I wonder where Bowie learned that," A.J. mused. "You know I wouldn't tell anyone but you, but I kind of admired your brother for that when they told me. Takes imagination, something like that." A.J. rolled another cigarette and lit it on an ember from the fire. "Well? You wanted to know."

"But why kill him," Travis said, "for something like that? Why not let the law—?"

"The law!" scoffed A.J. "The most the law could get him on would be assault. Maybe he'd go to jail for a year. That's too easy for Forge and Corril. They want him dead. He busted their pride when he marked them," A.J. grinned, "and their faces too."

"Pride," Travis said softly. "Pride." He spoke it at the bottom of a long sigh.

"Without it," A.J. shrugged, "a man ain't. You wanta know why you really came after your brother? I can tell you."

"You don't have to tell me, A.J."

"I bet I can." The little man wasn't going to leave it alone. "You said your father was killed in self-defense, according to the law. But the law you've lived by all your life ain't enough now. There's another law. I bet you found out. I bet all them good, God-loving, church people in your country helped you. I know your kind."

"You don't have to tell me, A.J."

"The law of pride, that's what. Pride and everyone to say what a fine man you are. That's what your kind want more than anything else."

"Then, why you, A.J.?" Travis said urgently. "Why are you going to kill him? You said you kind've admired him."

"I can admire him and I can still kill him. I don't, Forge and Corril will hire somebody else who will."

"Is there no law here to stop this kind of thing?"

"Law! Forge and Corril are the law. They're the big men in this country. They're power; they're money. That's the law. That's what controls it."

"Size makes right," muttered Travis.

"Now you're getting it." The little man patted his guns. "And these make me as big as any man living." He spat into the fire. "Bigger."

He was smiling now. "You know what A.J. means?" He'd reached around behind him and taken the circular string of what looked like old dried apricots from the pommel and was fingering it now.

Travis shook his head.

"Don't mean nothing. Just initials. That's all that was in the basket with me when I was dropped on them orphanage steps in New York. A card with the initials, A.J." His eyes twinkled. "I guess I'm a real bastard. Ten years I spent in that place. Ten long years before I run away. I was always small and 'cause I was small I was always picked on and beaten up by the other kids. Blamed for everything. A window broken—A.J. done it. Money stolen from the Sister's purse—A.J. Food swiped from the old icebox—A.J. The little Puerto Rican girl they pushed down the steps and broke her leg—A.J. A.J. done this, A.J. done that. A.J. done it; they was always blaming me. When I was ten I had enough. I run away." He stared hard at the odd garland in his hand. "No one was ever going to pick on me again. Had to have a name, though. That's right." The little man was grinning now. "As long as I had the game I might as well have the name. A.J. Dunit. D-U-N-I-T. I thought of it right away. I wasn't so good at spelling then

as I am now." He waited to watch the effect on his listener.

Travis didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The little man was stroking the apricot necklace. "Well, that's the way it happened," he said gruffly. "A.J. Dunit. You may not know it, but there's few others who don't, around here," he added proudly.

He lifted the garland again. He hefted the strung objects tenderly. "A.J. Dunit."

Travis tried not to stare. "What are those?"

"What are they? What do you think they are?" A.J. said stiffly.

"Look like dried apricots. But—"

"Apricots!" A.J.'s boyish laughter peeled through the trees. He stood up shaking, tears leaking out of his eyes, and flung the garland at Travis. "Here, then, have one! Eat up!"

The garland hit Travis in the chest and bounced into his lap. He picked it up gingerly. A heavy cord pierced each apricot, stringing them loosely together. He looked at them closer. They were dry, pinkish-gray, convoluted, with what appeared to be tiny, shriveled lobes on them. One was not near as dry as the others. Travis dropped the strand like it was afire.

"They're—they're—!"

A.J. was nodding his head, convulsed, unable to speak. "Ears?"

"Yes, oh my goddamn, yes!"

"One's fresh!" Instantly Travis knew. He pointed toward the valley. "Old Cayo?"

A.J. nodded again, drying his eyes, controlling himself now. "Only a five-hundred-dollar ear," A.J. was saying. "There's eighteen more there from two hundred and fifty dollars to twenty-five hundred dollars." A.J. cackled. "And not a single Indian either. Apricots! By God!"

Travis dropped his head as if he'd been clubbed. "Dear Lord," he whispered, "dear Lord—" He reached down quickly for the garland of ears. He flung that terrible wreath as far into the night as he could. It struck hard against the trunk of a nearby tree and fell back to the ground.

A.J. leaped across the fire. His hand stung the side of Travis' cheek. "Goddamn you! What are you doing?"

Travis lunged for the little man—had him by the neck—shook him wildly and hurled him through the coals of the dying fire.

A.J. fell heavily, a gun in his hand, hammer back, his eyes low-lidded with hate.

"You shouldn'ta done that!"

"I should have broken your neck," Travis said, flinching, waiting for the little man to shoot.

"But you didn't," A.J. said less harshly. "Did you? I had my gun in your belly all the time."

"It wouldn't have stopped me if I'd wanted."

"Maybe not. But I'd have taken you with me."

"I wish you had!" Travis was still trembling.

The pock-faced little man rose. He brushed his buckskin shirt and pants thoroughly. He was smiling again. "I didn't think you'd be useful, you'd be knowing right now whether you're ticketed for heaven or hell."

A.J. went to the tree and picked up the string of dried ears and laid it back on the saddle horn. "That's my mark," he said quietly. "A man has to have his mark."

The little man returned to the fire. He banked it carefully. Without a word then, he scrambled up steps he had hatcheted in a big pine. On the first limb he turned back to Travis. He said softly, "Throw me up your sugans and climb on up. There's room enough for two up here. 'Less you want to sleep with the wolves." Suddenly A.J.

grinned. "Not much choice is there, me or the wolves?"

Travis walked slowly to his warbag. He bent over it, his back to A.J. He took out his old frayed Bible. He started to shove it inside his shirt and stopped. He let it fall back into the bag. Doggedly he picked up his bedroll and tossed it up to A.J. Then he wormed his way up the trunk, catching the first big branch to swing himself up.

Further up the tree A.J. had laid pine boughs across a network of sturdy branches and woven a windbreak with more pine boughs. Here, then, high above the ground was to be their narrow, swaying bed.

Lying far over on his side Travis imagined he could still smell that stinking valley far below. He felt A.J.'s thin flanks lightly touching his own broader ones. He heard the little man's breathing deepen into a small snore.

Moving as gently as he could Travis shifted onto his back. A.J. sat up quickly. His face swiveled down to Travis.

"I forgot to tell you, Travis," he said, "I'm a very light sleeper." He lay back down and turned his back to Travis. He spoke sleepily, but as if he were smiling to himself, "Travis? You hear me? Travis?"

"I hear you."

"It's a long trail we may be started on. You going to want to kill your brother in twelve months same as now?"

"You, A.J.?"

"For three thousand dollars and expenses I'll want to kill him fifty years from now." The little man was chuckling. "Good night—pardner."

Travis squirmed back on his side unable to sleep. He was remembering those solemn words he had spoken to Zoanna such a short time ago. "There comes a time in every man's life," he'd said, "when he's got to decide what he really is." Now this man beside him, this merry,

humorous, little monster with his necklace of ears, and his two initials for a first name, and that impossible label for a last, this man, had called him pardner.

High in the tree he listened to what sounded like a thousand wolves challenging the night. The taint of the spoiled earth swelled the wind, rustling the boughs under his body. Deep inside his belly a terrible premonition twisted and fell. Pardner! This time he would have his chance. He would find out this time, all right.



THERE in the good grass was the house, whitewashed adobe like the smaller bunkhouse next to it. Beyond them a corral and barn, with heavy-uddered milk cows grazing their way slowly through the grass to the cottonwoods and sycamores along the river.

A single cottonwood shaded the front yard. Here Bowie Malabar reined the big black in and waited, the package bulking large in his arms. He was glad to wait. He had no heart for this chore. But he had put it off long enough. A haze of smoke curled above the house and drifted lazily in the warm, still air.

No one came to the door. His eyes swept the dog run to the sunken dugout next to the house. Didn't look like anyone down there, though.

Bowie dismounted and ground-tied the black. Slowly, favoring his still sore left shoulder he walked up onto the porch and rapped on the door. The porch was neat; the yard was neat. Everything clean and uncluttered here. Way a place should be. Way his mother used to keep their place. He rapped again, harder.

"Come in, well, come in," he heard her voice muffled behind the door. "I'm baking."

He shifted the big package in his arms and opened the door, lowering his head to enter. For a moment with the

sun behind him he was a slim, dark, faceless shadow entering the room. She was bent over the stove pushing trays of biscuits into the oven. There was white flour on the backs of her hands, her soft, freckled forearms, and a slash of white across her forehead and dark red hair.

"Walk slow, Billy," she said, glancing up briefly as he closed the door behind him. "Told you I wouldn't go to town with you this afternoon. No sense your coming back—"

Slowly, as if some harsh, impossible message finally filtered through from her senses to her brain, she raised her head from the oven. Her hand flew up to her mouth leaving a white stain there. She backed against the stove, her hands seeking the hot edge for support. She pulled away quickly, wringing her burnt hands. A twitch of a smile flickered across the strange welter of ugliness of Bowie's fresh-shaven face, softening the bruised flesh, the large nose, the pale dry blue eyes.

"I—I—thought you were Billy. Billy Clanton," she began. "When you come in, all I saw was the guns. I thought—"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, ma'am."

She shook her head violently as if to rid it of something. Her face was very red, whether from the heat or embarrassment he could not tell.

"I been meaning to come over for some time now," Bowie said. He stood straight and tall, his dark head almost touching the ceiling. "I—well—something for the boy, ma'am." Stiffly he shoved the package onto the table. "Seeing as how I'm almost his uncle. I mean—boys are rough on clothes," he said quickly, keeping her out a moment. "They told me his size at the store in town. What I mean is, ma'am, I'm sorry about the other day. Truly sorry." He lifted his long hands helplessly and let them fall. What was

the matter with her? Why didn't she speak? Even if she swore at him again or went for a gun it would help. She was going to give him no help.

He went on slowly, "I didn't know who you were then. All I thought you were was someone else trying to kill me. The blood must've crazied me." He shook his head. "My brother's woman," he said between gritted teeth. "Too many terrible things been happening to me these last weeks. I'm not excusing what I've done. There's no excuse for it. I reckon you had good reason for wanting to kill me. Been thinking about that." He rolled his hat in his long fingers. "Reckon you figure I'll kill Travis sure, we meet up again. You must love him real strong, ma'am."

If there were only hate or fear in her eyes. If there were only something in her eyes he could understand. He felt worn out by the length of his talk. But only her lower lip was quivering.

"Well, much obliged to you, ma'am, for listening me through. Not throwing me out." He tried a smile. He put on his hat, tipped it to her, and started for the door.

"Wait," she said tonelessly. Her back stiffened and she turned her face half away from him. She was breathing strongly, the cloth of the dress moving in and out tightly across her bosom, filling Bowie now with the ache of remembering.

"I'm waiting, ma'am," he said softly.

"You aim to stay here—in the valley?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why?" She turned her flushed face to him now, her eyes large with torment.

"Why, ma'am? There's work to be done around the place. Cattle, those peaches, all need tending. I can help some while Travis is gone."

"And Travis?"

"I reckon if he's looking for me I'd better stay put a while. A man out hunting will always find you sooner or later. He'll be writing you, letting you know where he is. Maybe you'll tell him I'm here."

She was silent.

"Never was any real trouble between Travis and me before. Won't be now either if I can get a hold of him. You can save me a lot of time."

She turned her back on him. Straight, rigid, trembling. Soft red hair, white nape of neck, curving hips, strong straight legs. He licked his dry lips. "I can wait." He noted his voice was thickening. Swiftly he moved to the door. He said, "Nice place you have here. Good day to you, ma'am."

She stood in the doorway and watched him ride off. That bullet must have done little damage from the way he rode, she was thinking. Lord, but he was tall. Tall, tall. He turned his head, saw her, and tipped his hat again. A strange, forbiddingly marked face, wind-scoured, beaten out of pure rock. Old, that face. Like the eyes. Unexpectedly, a young smile tugged the earth-carved ugliness away from it now. Her own face crimsoned.

She slammed the door, furious at herself for having been caught staring. She leaned against the door breathing hard.

She had known he would come, had known it was inevitable. Four days she had feared it, dreaded it. Still—? She didn't let herself pursue the question that had been haunting her those four days of waiting.

Her hands rose to her cheeks. They were burning hot. She rushed to the sink and pumped water into the basin. She laved her face with the cool water and dried herself. She touched her cheeks. They were still warm.

She saw the package on the table. Should she have thrown it out in the dirt after him? What had turned her so strange, so silent and weak while he was here?

She tore at the package. Had she really been afraid he wouldn't come? Was that it? The question she'd held back possessed her now. Wildly she broke the heavy string wrapping with her bare hands. She ripped the paper away. Inside were boots, levi pants, a blue shirt, hat, bandanna, a small pair of chaps.

The first tears moved quickly down the sides of her face. She fell into a chair by the table, laid her head on one of the small boots. Her whole body spasmed.

"Travis," she whispered, "Travis."

High on Table Top Rock overlooking the broad San Pedro Valley the two small boys faced each other. They held sticks in their hands. At their feet stood two wooden boxes with tiny holes bored in the sides. Between the boys sat a metal washtub.

"All right!" said Mica Wade, his brown eyes glittering with excitement. "Fair and square."

"Wait," said Paddy Murphy. He closed off a nostril with one finger and honked out of the other. "All right!" he said.

Each boy opened the box at his feet, and probed inside with his stick. Billy the Kid grappled viciously with Mica's stick and finally clung to it. Murietta swung easily onto Paddy's stick.

Quickly both boys lifted their crawling, hairy burdens out of the boxes.

"Now!" said Mica.

"Now!" said Paddy.

Simultaneously they jarred loose Billy the Kid and Murietta into the metal tub.

Billy the Kid immediately tried to climb the side of the tub. Murietta stretched his long hairy legs in all directions. He moved cautiously around the bottom of the tub. He flicked a leg tentatively up the side. Another leg brushed Billy the Kid. He whirled to face the enemy. Billy the Kid hooked a leg out slowly to touch Murietta and withdrew it swiftly. Instantly, then, they were locked together, two large, plate-size tarantulas, their scaly, hairy legs thrashing in all directions, their ugly compact bodies drumming against the metal of the tub as one climbed on top, then the other. Now the legs of the great spiders were working more slowly, purposefully, twining through each other like a basketful of small snakes as they positioned their stingers.

Paddy stepped back a pace. "Goddamn, Mica! Did you ever?"

Mica's eyes were brimming. He didn't speak.

Clasped in each other's legs, the great ugly brown spiders leaped six inches in the air.

"Which is which?" said Paddy. "Murietta's the darkest one, isn't he? Isn't he, Mica?"

"Yes," whispered Mica. "He's a Mexican, isn't he?"

Paddy bristled. "Billy the Kid's nothing—nothing but a thief!"

"We'll see," said Mica.

"You bet we'll see!" Paddy turned his scared, round face back to the fight.

The two spiders were lashed tight to each other now. They took turns pushing each other around the tub. Occasionally a long hair-spiked leg struck out savagely for a purchase. The scraping of their long legs and furry bodies on the metal was spooking goose pimples up Mica's back.

The tarantulas moved slower and slower until finally, glued together, they made no movement at all. Paddy honked. "What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know. I think the fight's over."

"Over? Who won?"

"Can't tell yet."

They continued watching the silent, grim-locked pair of spiders.

Finally Paddy said, "Let's sit down, huh, Mica? We can hear them if they start fighting again. Nothing doing there now." He sniffled. "This cold makes me tired."

"All right," Mica said disgustedly. They moved off and sat on the edge of the great flat ledge, legs dangling, looking down on the river and grasslands below.

"Let me try your new hat, Mica," said the round-faced Paddy.

Carefully Mica handed him his new gray curly-brimmed hat.

Paddy put it on his head. It looked funny. "Too small," said Paddy, handing it back.

He looked over Mica's new blue shirt, denim pants, fine brown calfskin boots. "Sure fine duds you got on today, Mica. I wish my Maw would buy me clothes like that."

"My Maw didn't buy these."

"Didn't, huh?"

"He did." Mica pointed down the valley in the general direction of the Malabar spread.

"Who did?"

"Bowie Malabar." Mica frowned. "He brought 'em this morning."

"Why did he do that?"

"I don't know." Suddenly, he added, "I'm going to ride over there this afternoon and thank him. I am," he repeated, as if the reiteration gave him the strength for the deed. "You want to come along?"

"No, I don't think so," Paddy said, startled, honking

over the ledge. "I better get home after the fight." He looked down at his feet, watching his eight-year-old friend out of the corner of his eye. He wiped his nose. "Aren't you afraid?" he said then. "'Bout going over there? To see that man?"

"No," Mica said, turning his reddening face away, searching far up the valley, seeing nothing but a sky-tall man, a face branded by scars, eyes blank, saying, "Git, boy! Git now!"

Paddy rose to check the washtub. "My God, Mica!" He sounded scared. "My God!"

Mica bounded up and peered into the metal tub. The spooks lifted his skin and buzzed the back of his arms. The lighter-colored of the two tarantulas, Billy the Kid, was bloated to almost double his natural size. He was immobile, hooked to what was left of Murietta. It wasn't much. Just a transparent shell. All the juice, meat, blood, tissue of Murietta had been sucked dry.

Mica felt a little sick. Paddy turned away. "I'm going home," he said.

"All right," said Mica. He took his stick and picked up the swollen Billy the Kid. Parts of Murietta still clung to him. Other parts crumpled away like a fine filmy ash and drifted down on the rock. Mica put Billy the Kid into his box and silently followed Paddy with his tub and empty box down the rocks. The uneasy twitching in his stomach had passed. His chest tightened with pride over his spider's great victory.

He watched Paddy lash the tub and box on the old bay mare. Wordlessly Paddy mounted.

Suddenly Mica thought, he's my best friend. He said, "Tomorrow I'll help you find another tarantula."

Paddy spurred his horse into motion.

"He put up a good fight, Paddy," Mica called after him. "Billy the Kid was just lucky."



Paddy didn't turn around. He nodded slowly, with dignity, staring straight ahead. He leaned over the saddle. He honked a beauty.



## II

STRETCHED ON THE GROUND, his back against the corral post, his long legs flat, Bowie switched the tag end of a piece of rope in front of the bright eyes of a tiny gray kitten. Eagerly the kitten followed the pendulum movement of the rope, standing on its hind legs to bat the rope from claw to claw. The sun roosting on the rim of the mountains sparkled in the cat's wild yellow eyes.

Bowie smiled. The cat was taking the edge off his saddle-weariness. When he'd left the woman this morning he'd ridden hard almost all day. He'd started by circling the southern end of the valley. He felt he had it just about sized up. He'd checked brands carefully and knew now just which range each rancher was running his cattle on. Springs and water holes had been spotted and remembered. He noted that the Clanton brand monopolized the best share of range and water holes both. He hadn't gone as far as the Army fort in the Huachuca Mountains but he'd ridden close enough today to mark its location.

Good land here, all of it. Good fat grass rolling out from the river to the foothills. The kind you could pluck from under your horse's belly and run through your teeth without setting them on edge; the kind you could slip through your fingers and feel the cool promise of marrow, tallow and muscle before it left your hand. It

wasn't overgrazed and thistle-taken like so much grass he'd seen in Texas and Kansas these last few years. Too many cattle, though, running back there in the hills and ravines. Too many poorly worked-over brands. He knew what that meant. He was surprised the hide burners were so bad at it. They must be mighty sure of themselves. In the back of his mind he made a note that he hadn't seen any Clanton cattle with their brands changed. It was an old story. There were those who took and those who allowed themselves to be taken. Somewhere in life you chose which you were going to be. It was a hard choice. But it was harder to change once you had made it.

Later that afternoon he'd been up Barbarcomori Creek again to check the peaches. He'd come on several townspeople from Tombstone near the little overnight cabin, just looking at the trees as if they were a group of Sunday picknickers. It was a sight, all right. He estimated there were about five acres of young trees, small, green, fighting the weeds, but doing well, served by a great ditch from the creek to the orchard. He shook his head. Another one of Paw's pipedreams, he thought, and headed back for the ranch, suddenly cow-tired.

The kitten was still worrying the rope when Bowie saw the dust of the boy's horse swirling toward him. He shoved the cat away from him abruptly. Remaining seated, Bowie took out paper and fixings from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette. The boy approached more slowly and came to a stop. Scared by the noise of the horse, the kitten scurried around the end of the corral and crouched with its belly against the earth, watching.

Bowie lit his cigarette and wondered if the boy had seen him playing with the kitten. He made a brief gesture with his hand. "Set a spell, cowboy?" he said.

The boy dismounted and tied his horse to one of the

fence poles on the corral. He hunkered down a few feet in front of Bowie. He was wearing his new clothes. Under the gray hat Bowie could see the unruly tallow hair. Not his mother's, he thought idly. The boy had a good face, clean-featured, clear brown eyes, when he looked at you. He was having trouble now. He fingered a pattern in the dirt and studied it.

Christ! Bowie said to himself. You damn ugly bastard!

"Well, cowboy?" Bowie said. He kept the sharpness he felt out of his voice.

The boy finally looked up. He was forcing himself. "Thank you for the clothes," he said quickly, and started stirring the dirt again.

"Well," Bowie said, waiting, "that wasn't so hard, was it?"

A grin splintered the boy's young open face. He shook his head. "No," he said, looking at Bowie out of the top of his eyes.

Bowie smiled. He saw the surprise in the boy's face. "It's all right, cowboy, it's still me."

"I never seen you smile before," said the boy. "You're different."

"No need to thank me for anything."

"Why'd you bring me these things?"

"'Cause I wanted to. 'Cause I'm almost your uncle." He shrugged, knowing neither answer was adequate. "What's your name, boy?" he added, trying to soften it.

"Micaiah. Everyone calls me Mica."

"Mica? Seen that in rocks."

"What?"

"Your name."

The boy looked puzzled. "In rocks?"

"Not important, boy. You can call me Bowie."

The kitten, her courage restored, and not having had

enough of play, was stealthily approaching the man and boy. The boy reached out and scruffed her ears. She arched her back and tail for him.

"You like cats?" Bowie said.

The boy nodded.

"Dogs?"

"Yes."

"You got a dog?"

"No. I got a tarantula, though." He pointed to the box tied to his horse. "He fought today."

"Did he now? How did he do?"

"He won. He ate Paddy Murphy's tarantula clean up."

"You be careful of that spider, boy. They're dangerous. Your Maw should get you a dog."

"I really want a gun."

"You got a gun."

"This thing?" The boy withdrew his wooden pistol from his waistband and looked at it contemptuously. "I mean a real gun." He fixed shining eyes on the well-worn handles of Bowie's two guns.

"They'll be time," Bowie said. "When you get this kind you'll be wishing you had a wooden one again."

The boy replaced his wooden gun under his belt. He lapsed into silence, finger tracing a gun in the dirt.

The boy stirred Bowie strangely, uneasily. Something below the surface of this tallow-haired boy he couldn't put his finger on.

Carefully the boy put the front sight on the gun. "Why'd you kill your Paw?" he said quietly, looking up at Bowie quickly, then back down at his dirt.

There it was again, Bowie thought. It was always back to that. Even with the boy.

"You musta had a reason."

A reason, a reason. Bowie looked out over the boy's bowed head, out over the grass and bur sage, the mesquite

and mountains, out over all hot dusty space, and all lost time. A reason? A man beating a woman—his wife; a boy—his son. Is that a reason? A man working his woman, a sick woman, to the limit of her endurance. Is that a reason? A man providing food and shelter for his young son, yet thwarting his every other desire, his love of guns and horses and men, and poker and drink and freedom with young friends. Is that a reason? A man who laughed at his son's affection for his mother and shamed him for it. Is that a reason?

A man who raised his son in Texas, where loyalty, bravery and honesty were inbred, yet acting in exact opposition to these principles. Is that a reason? A man deferred from serving in the war because he raised cattle in Texas, selling those cattle to Northern forces in New Orleans; telling his son he only did it so he could move the family to Arizona where his mother might get well; yet one week later turning right around and investing the money in a wild get-rich-scheme to tin beef. Is that a reason?

A man, forewarned about trouble over Spanish fever, trailing his tick-infested herd north to Abilene across the forbidden deadline; waylaid by an army of Jayhawkers, tied to a tree with his son, beaten with hickory poles which scar the boy forever; untied by the Jayhawkers, thrown on the ground and urinated on; the Texas-raised boy screaming to fight his tormentors, the man holding him down saying, "This is better than dying." Is that a reason?

A man taking the money his son sent home for doctors and medicine for his sick mother, and investing it in peaches, still another get-rich-quick scheme. Is that a reason?

"You musta," the boy repeated, fingering in the dirt.

Bowie looked at the boy. "I had a reason," he said, slowly. He stood up stiffly. He picked the boy up under his armpits and held him suspended in the air. The boy was startled by the unexpected action but there was no real

fear in his wide eyes. Bowie set him lightly on his horse.

"You and that tarantula better be getting home. It's late. Your Maw'll be worried. Never worry your Maw. Understand?" Suddenly Bowie smiled. "Sometime you want to learn roping, you come by. I'll show you."

"Shooting too?"

"We'll see."

"I reckon you've trailed cows all the way up to the Yellowstone, haven't you?"

"I've done my share, boy. Now, git."

"I'll be seeing you, Mr. Bowie."

"Bowie," Bowie said softly. "Not Mr. Just Bowie."

"Goodbye—Bowie."

The boy waved and spurred his old mare into a high lope. Bowie looked after him, sorry to see him leave. He glanced around for the little kitten. It was gone too.

Bowie started for the bunkhouse. Abruptly he stopped and went back to the corral, saddled a fresh horse and rode off toward Charleston. He couldn't stand another dinner in the bunkhouse with the accusing faces of the Mexican and his wife hovering over his shoulder. And he didn't want to eat alone in the big house. What he wanted was a drink. One rough enough to stand on its two feet. One strong enough to dull an old ache. One surrounded by sweaty, smelly, noisy men.

The boy, he thought, the boy brought it on tonight. How often had he a chance to talk to a boy these past ten years? He licked his dry lips and frowned. The boy, the lost years, yes—and the sky, the high sky.



THE SUN, so near to setting, irked Zoanna now almost as much as the pie at her side as she drove the old buggy slowly down the river road. When she laid a hand on the dried apple pie, carefully wrapped in paper, it felt no longer warm. Neither, however, did it feel really cold.

The sun was just disappearing when she halted the rig in front of the Malabars' low adobe house. She waited as the woman, Juana, came to the door of the bunkhouse, red peppers drying from the eaves behind her head.

"*Buenas tardes, señora Wade,*" the woman said. But there was no sign of welcome on her dark face.

"Hello, Juana. Is Mr. Malabar here?"

"The big one?" She raised her right hand high.

"Yes."

"Still out with the cattle with my man."

"Oh." All the way over, despite the necessity of seeing him, she had hoped he wouldn't be here. Now that he wasn't, she was surprised at her sudden disappointment. It had been almost four weeks since he'd come to her house with those clothes for Mica. She hadn't seen him since.

"When will he be in?"

Juana emerged from the shadows of the doorway into

the last fading light, bringing the pungent smells of beans and chili and boiling beef.

"Not long, *señora*. Even if he doesn't, the other men must eat." Juana hesitated.

She doesn't like me, Zoanna thought. Like all the rest of the women. Mexican or white.

"You can come inside the big house and wait," Juana said. There was a note of doubt in the woman's voice.

"Do you think it's all right?"

Juana raised her dark brows. "What harm? All the harm has long been done."

Zoanna started. But, of course, the fat woman was only thinking of the old man's death. Wasn't she?

Zoanna dismounted, gripping the pie firmly under one arm. The Mexican woman glanced at the package impertinently. With that nose, Zoanna thought, she'll have no trouble figuring out what this is. She followed the other woman into the house.

"Leave the door open, *señora*."

She understood immediately why the woman had suggested this. The smell of the house was rank and fetid with old food, grease and dust. Zoanna crinkled her nose in disgust.

"It is strong in here!" she said.

"Strong, *señora*?" The fat dark woman laughed loudly but without mirth. "*Señora*, it stinks!" Then she added to the odors by lighting a coal oil lamp, and began clearing away the littered table, piling cups and dishes on the sink. "He is a bad one, this one, *señora*. He has not let me clean this pigpen once since the first day."

"But why, Juana?"

"Why? Who knows? He is here so little. Just to sleep. Or drink his coffee. He wants no one in this house." She began building a fire in the stove. "It is not like they were brothers at all, this one and *señor* Travis. *Señor* Travis, aye, he was

a good man, as a lamb. This one is like the wolf. No smile on that devil's face. Let me tell you, though, *señora*, underneath there is the volcano. I know. We saw it the first day."

She now put a pot of coffee on the stove. "You will perhaps like a cup while you wait?"

"Thank you, Juana. You are kind."

"I am not kind." The Mexican woman shrugged. "But life is short." She turned to go.

"Juana?"

"Yes, *señora*."

"Have you heard from Mr. Travis yet? A letter, perhaps?"

"No, *señora*. Have you?"

"No," she lied.

"When do you think he will be back?"

"I—I don't know."

The woman shook her head. "It is a bad cause he has gone on. For *señor* Travis it is a devil's cause. He is like a baby to this one."

"I know."

"What will happen to him, *señora*?" There was genuine concern in her face and voice.

"I wish I knew, Juana," she said softly. "You like him, don't you?"

The fat woman's face froze. "I like everybody," she said stonily. "It is God's will. I must get back to my cooking, *señora*. The men will not want their beans burnt." She bowed. "Good day, *señora*." She turned and walked quickly out of the house, her broad back a dour, inflexible reprimand.

Zoanna set the paper-wrapped pie on the table and stared about the large room. Dust, cobwebs, dirty dishes, nose-curdling odors. It was hard to believe a woman had ever lived in this house. A woman whose hand had marked this cold empty space, these dull, lifeless blocks of straw

and clay with order and neatness and the good smells of home.

The coffee was boiling strongly now and she moved the old blackened pot to the rear of the small stove, glad to back away for a moment from the persisting uneasiness she felt in this gloomy house. When she heard the riders, she sat down quickly at the table.

A few moments later a figure blotted out the dusk in the doorway. It was him, adding to the stout smell of horse and cattle and droppings to the already heady mixture of the house. He tossed his hat on a chair and loosened his bandanna.

"Well?" He spoke without welcome, without surprise, his eyes wind-red, his dark hair matted. He was unshaven, a dark shag of beard rising on his welted face like a thicket on a ridge.

"Hello," she said, rising. "I've been waiting for you."

"I see you have." His eyes flicked to the paper-wrapped pie on the table, then to the coffee on the stove. She found herself flushing.

He moved slowly to the cupboard and searched for cups, finally found clean ones, filled them with coffee and set one in front of her. He sat down opposite her cradling his cup in his two large hands.

"Milk? Sugar?"

"No thank you," she said.

"Good. Don't have any, anyhow."

He sipped slowly not taking his eyes from her. "Pie?" he said.

She nodded.

He unwrapped it. "For me?"

Her jaw muscles tightened. "Yes."

He rose again and brought two plates from the cupboard, blowing the dust off them.

"I don't care for any," she said quickly.

He cut a generous piece for himself, the knife sliding easily through the crisp, brown crust and the soft apple filling. He ate quietly but swiftly.

"He's lucky," he said when he finished.

"Who?"

"Travis."

"Oh."

"All right," he said, shoving the plate away. "What is it? What do you want of me?"

"Well, I—what do you mean, what do I want of you?"

He gentled it. "I came bearing gifts once, too," he said. "I know."

"Why did you come that day?" she said.

He spread one hand briefly. "To apologize, I reckon," he said, his voice barely audible. "Did you come to apologize, ma'am?"

There was a glint in his eyes. Was he smiling at her, laughing at her, remembering, behind those eyes?

"No!" Her face was hot. "I didn't come to apologize. I came—have you heard from Travis?" she blurted.

Weariness eased into the deep seams of his face. "No," he said.

"Well, I have!"

"When?"

"I received a letter from him yesterday."

"Where is he?"

"He's still looking for you."

"Where is he?" he insisted.

Again she evaded the question. "He wanted to know if you had been seen around these parts."

"What did you say?"

"I haven't written him yet."

"Tell him I'm here. Tell him to get here quick. I want to see him. I'm tired of this place. Tell him—but you're not going to tell him, are you?"

"No."

"And you're not going to tell me where he is."

"No. Look, Mr. Malabar—"

"Bowie," he said shortly. "Bowie."

"Bowie. You don't know the way Travis left here. He intended to obtain satisfaction from you. To kill you. He was shamed into it, I know, by these gun-crazy people around here." Her voice wavered. "He's a good, kind, peaceable man. You know that. He wants to stay here in this valley and live. He loves this land. He thinks he can't now unless he finds you and kills you like these people seem to want him to. He's been pushed into it and feels he can't get out."

"Travis wouldn't try to kill me. I don't believe it."

"You do believe it!"

"Well?"

"If I tell you where Travis is and you write him, or I tell Travis where you are, he'll come as fast as he can and he'll try to kill you, and be killed himself."

Suddenly he frowned. "You must want to marry that boy a whole lot."

"More than you'll ever know."

"What do you want of me?"

"A favor. Leave it alone. For God's sake, Bowie, leave it alone. He's bound to write here one of these days. To Compadre or one of the hired hands. You can get the mail in town. Intercept those letters, or tell the men not to mention you're here."

Bowie shrugged. "No matter what I do, stay, move on, he's sure to find me sooner or later."

"That's the point. Let him search. Let it take time. Plenty of time. Hasn't it been your experience, Bowie, the longer a person waits, the less inclined he is to do a thing?"

"Maybe."

"For once in his life Travis acted in anger. Let it cool off. He's too good and sensible a person not to return to his senses. But give him room. That's what I ask, beg of you. Haven't you ever acted in anger? Haven't you?" she persisted, her face reddening. She was being unfair. She was stabbing deep at herself as well as at him. "Haven't you regretted it afterward?" It was almost a whisper.

Bowie stood up quickly and walked silently about the room. His head almost touched the ceiling. His hands jerked once at his sides.

"Time never hurt anything, I reckon," he said. "You better get home now. It's getting late."

She rose, her eyes large with the tears she'd been holding back too long. "Thank you, Bowie."

"That was a good example you used," he said coldly. "Or maybe I should say, didn't use."

She walked quickly out the door, her head tilted high. He followed her and helped her into the buggy. Then he mounted his own horse.

"I'll ride you home," he said.

"No need," she said. "It's only five miles."

"It's night."

"I have a rifle. I know how to use it. Been taking care of myself all my life."

"I know," he said flatly. "Let's go."

In the dark she smiled to herself. In his own strange way he was telling her he knew she ran a spread of her own and ran it well, that she was a self-reliant woman; but he was telling her, too, she was still a woman and deserving respect for that reason alone.

She drove the buggy slowly, Bowie letting his horse out easily on her left side. An owl hooted, and far off a coyote was already wailing at the horn of a moon above the mountains. The cottonwoods and sycamores threw dark shadows across the lighter darkness of the river road.

To make conversation, she tried to tell him something about Tombstone and this valley, how the hamstringing political rivalry in Tombstone between the Republican U.S. Marshal's office and the Democratic Sheriff's office made it easy for so many hard-case cowhands to infiltrate the San Pedro Valley and take their toll in stolen stock from the ranchers.

His answering silence, however, gave her little help and she tried another tack. "My boy's been coming over here. What's he been doing?"

"I've been teaching him roping. Do you mind?"

"I don't know. He's so hard to keep track of."

"Good spirit in him. He wants to shoot a gun. You ought to buy him a .22 rifle, ma'am."

"There are too many gunmen around here already."

"Where everyone wears a gun, a boy can have a powerful hankering. Can get him into trouble if he's kept away from it too long." He paused and said quietly, "I know. Don't mean to tell you how to raise your boy, ma'am. Just thought you should know this."

"Thank you for telling me. It's not the easiest thing in the world for a woman to raise a boy in this country."

He didn't answer. He was back in his shell again.

There was no sound now but the clip-clop of horses' hooves. Bowie was a high, dark shadow on her left. She had the odd, tingly sensation he was watching her. She turned quickly but caught only the dark shadow of his profile tilted toward the stars, a wrist pressed to his mouth. Yet she couldn't rid herself of this feeling he was watching her, watching her intently all the time. What thoughts ran through that mutilated head? The skin shivered along her neck.

There was that thing between them on the rocks that day. It would always be with them, a thing shared. He would never forget it. Was he remembering it now, too?



Yes, she would have sworn he was, just as she had been remembering it, had remembered it before, and would remember it later.

Out of the corner of her eye she watched him, head high, still looking at those damn stars, not looking at her at all. But he was; he was; he must be.

"Mrs. Wade?"

The voice came soft and low out of that high inscrutable shadow. A small chill moved upon her.

"Yes?" she said, fret and an old impatience pitching her voice high.

"Tell me, Mrs. Wade, do you love him at all?"

"Mica?" Her hands trembled on the reins.

"Not Mica."

"Damn you!" she said. "Goddamn you!" She whipped the team into a startled run.

He overtook her easily. He leaned over and down. "Thank you for the pie, ma'am," he said. He tipped his hat. "Good evening, Mrs. Wade." He wheeled his horse and was gone.

Straight ahead was the light of her house. She stopped and listened to the sound of his horse's hoofbeats. The shivers swamped her. He had him on a high gallop. He was riding back as hard and fast as he could.



THE FIVE MEN sat cross-legged on the ground around the noon branding fire, their long sharp sticks plunged deep into the flames. The round chunks of searing meat impaled on the sticks splatted fat, fragrant juice onto the coals.

Quickly the fire scorched the meat, and just as quickly Compadre and the three other *vaqueros* withdrew their sticks and munched greedily the blackened, almost raw gobbets of meat, the sweet juices and fiery fats slopping unheeded onto their shirts, hands and chaps.

Bowie left his stick in the flames much longer than the others, letting all the meat's juices explode out into the fire. When he was sure it was done he withdrew his stick and slowly ate the charred meat on the end of it.

Behind him, herded together by three other *vaqueros*, the late fall calves bawled for their mothers and kicked up grass and dust. The smell of singed hides, hot iron, and the bloody cutting knife intermingled with that of the cooking meat.

Compadre straightened his gimpy leg under him and jerked his hand toward the river. Bowie followed the movement. A small ball of dust was rolling up through the mesquite from the river. It grew larger.

"*Quien es?*" said one of the *vaqueros*.

"*El niño*," Compadre said around a mouthful of flesh. "*Siempre el niño*."

In a moment horse and rider came flying out of the dust onto the grass and Bowie could see it was the boy, riding his old fat sorrel mare.

The boy circled the cows and calves and pulled up in front of the fire.

"Light, and get the wrinkles out of your belly, Mica," Bowie said.

The boy, his wooden gun tucked firmly in his belt band, dismounted and hunkered down cross-legged next to Bowie.

"Here," Bowie said handing him his stick. "Dip into that sack next to Compadre and get yourself some feed."

The boy speared himself a piece of meat and broiled it over the fire. Bowie poured coffee and watched the youngster eat. He ate slowly, hesitantly, not like a man hungry, but more as if he were eating just because everyone else was. The Mexicans were grinning at each other. The boy looked up at Bowie, puzzled.

"Know what they are?" said Bowie.

"Sure," said Mica.

"Don't much care for them?"

"I never did," said Mica. "Something about them."

"I didn't care for them either, when I was your age."

Mica laid the stick down. One of the *vaqueros* winked. "Ehh, *niño*," he said, "what's the matter? Don't you like the little balls of the calf?" He stuck a hairy arm stiff in the air. "Will make you strong as the bulls."

Compadre stirred on his gimpy leg. The other Mexicans smiled greasily at each other.

"You'd rather eat little girls' titties," the *vaquero* went on. "Ehh, *niño*? I know."

"Shut up!" Bowie snapped.

The Mexican spread his hands. "*Pues, seguro, señor*. But, of course, *señor*. It was only a joke."

"Make your goddamn jokes with the rope and the iron." Bowie stood up. "Come on, Mica." They mounted and rode over to the calf herd.

"I got a pie for you in my saddlebags," Mica said.

"Another one? Your Maw know you're here?"

"Of course. How would I get the pie?"

"Just wondering. You've been coming out this way pretty often lately."

"You don't want me to come?"

"It's not that. I want to make sure your Maw knows where you're at."

"She knows. Don't know why she has to send a pie, though, every time. Why she do that, Bowie?"

"Maybe she's bribing me."

"What's that mean?"

Bowie looked down at the wide-eyed, tow-headed boy. "It means she's a good woman."

"Yeah. She says even though there may be trouble between the two of you, you're still Travis' brother, and all alone in that big house, and once almost my uncle."

Bowie suppressed a smile. "She says all that?"

"Yes."

"You like your Maw, Mica?"

"Sure I do. She's funny sometimes, though. She's got a bold glance."

Bowie blinked, narrowed his eyes. "Who said she had a bold glance?"

"People, Paddy Murphy's folks, Paddy. What's a bold glance?"

Bowie shrugged. "It isn't bad. Honest, maybe."

"That's what Mama said. I didn't quite believe her, though."

"You do now?"

"Well—" Mica was thoughtful now—"I guess she's honest, all right."

Bowie looked curiously at the lad. Always the questions. Had he asked so many when he was that young? Probably—before his father made it impossible. He smiled. He liked this boy. Liked having him around, showing him things, teaching him things. One day he had dreamed of having a boy of his own like this.

A calf butted its way out of the herd. With a short nod, Bowie said, "Go get him."

"Me?"

"You! Git now!"

Mica spurred his old sorrel after the fleeing calf. Bowie held up a hand signaling one of the *vaqueros* off.

Mica uncoiled his rope, following every move of the zigging calf. The animal spun and crossed under the frightened mare's neck. Trembling, Mica cast his loop as the mare set down unsteadily. He missed.

"Relax, cowboy," Bowie called. "I taught you better'n that."

Mica wheeled the mare again on the calf. Chagrined he coiled his rope, his loop ready again. He said a little prayer and cast, snaring the front legs. Down went the calf. The mare stopped, balking, wanting to run, not to hold.

"Have to get you a roping horse, cowboy," Bowie said, riding up with two *vaqueros*. "This hoss of yours is kind of old." The boy was looking up at him expectantly. "Take him now," he said to the two *vaqueros*, who spread the calf, ear-cut him, gelded him, and branded him in less than a minute's time.

The boy was still waiting.

"Nice throw," Bowie said, turning away from the big grin erupting on the boy's face.

The boy stayed with him all afternoon, watching eagerly, trying to help, getting in the way mostly. When the last

calf had been branded and Bowie headed back for the ranchhouse the boy rode in with him.

They rode quietly till they reached the river. "Can I shoot your guns, Bowie?" the boy asked.

"What do you want to shoot?"

"That cottonwood tree. That boll on the trunk."

Bowie took the gun out of his right holster. He handed it to the boy, butt first, barrel down.

The boy reached over, took it barrel down and carefully held it that way till it had cleared Bowie and his horse.

"You remembered this time," Bowie said. "Good."

Mica grinned.

He held the gun in two hands and pointed it at the tree some fifty feet away. "I got to hold it this way, Bowie," he apologized. "It's too heavy." He thumbed the hammer back. He fired. "Did I hit it? Did I?"

He handed the gun back to Bowie, butt first, barrel down. "Your turn," he said, moving his horse off to the side.

Bowie slid the gun back into his holster. The boy's eyes were fixed on him hungrily. Swiftly, effortlessly, Bowie's hand struck for his gun, came up fast, but not too fast, thumb rolling hammer back, firing across his chest. One, two, three, four! Bits of shattered wood flew out of the boll on the trunk of the tree. The boy was flying for the tree. He examined the pan-sized boll.

"Only four holes," he cried disappointedly.

"One of mine must have got away."

"You know it didn't. I missed."

"You closed your eyes again."

"I know. It's so heavy and makes such a loud noise."

"You get used to it."

"When, Bowie?"

"When you're older. When you can hold it in one hand. You're doing right now, just learning to handle a gun safe."

"You're the best, aren't you, Bowie? With a gun?"

"There's lots better than me."

"No, there isn't. The Marshal in Tombstone is my friend. He says there's no one as fast as you. He says you're the best."

"Once I thought I was."

"How many men you killed?"

"Three." It came out before he could hold it back. He was shocked to realize he had included his father's death in the total.

"Only three? Who were they?"

"Just bad men and fools."

"And Travis makes four," the boy said without emotion. "Don't seem hardly enough for the best."

Bowie jogged his horse toward the house, pulling away from the boy. Suddenly he was sick of him, sick of what he saw of himself in this boy, sick of what the boy had brought him up against.

In the house he poured himself a drink and drank it neat. It cleared his head, cleansed his throat of dust and the taste of blood. He poured another and turned to see the boy in the doorway. Why hadn't he gone home? he thought angrily. He glared at the boy.

"Do—do you drink whiskey, Bowie?"

"This isn't milk!"

"Mr. Malabar used to drink it a lot. I could smell it on him all the time. What's it like?"

"Medicine."

"What's it good for?"

Bowie frowned, the welt ridging up on his forehead. He tapped the side of his head. "This," he said.

Why did the boy stand there watching him, staring at



his guns? Always those damn guns. The big horses, the brave men who rode them, the shiny guns they wore. A boy's dream. He had dreamed it too.

Suddenly, then, he set his drink down and went over and pulled out the big trunk from under the bed. He rummaged in the bottom till he found the old pistol and cartridge belt.

He lifted it out gently. "My first gun," Bowie said. "When I was ten. My folks wouldn't let me have a gun either. I took this off a dead Indian. Lord knows where he got it. You oil it up like I showed you, it'll still work. It's a Navy Colt .36, converted to rimfire. You understand what that means? Never mind. Here." Roughly he shoved the old gun and belt at the boy. "You're sure you know how to handle a gun safe now?" he added. "So you won't hurt yourself and anyone else? Even accidental?"

The boy nodded his head, unable to speak. He stared down at the ancient pistol in his hands. His first real gun. He was trembling all over.

"Thank you, Bowie," he whispered. He was a small dark streak sprinting for the door. He was a blur on his horse galloping way into the dusk.

That evening at the kitchen table under the mealy glare of the coal oil lamp, Bowie went over his father's old worn ledger. A half-empty bottle flanked him on his left and a coffee pot gurgled on the stove behind him.

On the lined yellow paper there were entries in his father's large flowing script with the i's undotted, and more entries in Travis' smaller, neater, upright hand. Between the two Bowie could read a good part of the story of their lives these last three years in the San Pedro Valley. They had shown a profit in cattle, but had plowed all this money and more back into peaches.

There was the cost of the seedlings, and the cost of trans-

portation by water from San Francisco to Yuma, then overland by freight wagon to Tombstone. There was the cost of insecticide, fertilizer, fencing. Two whole pages of debits, the credits drained dry, and not a peach harvested yet.

The top of the page was marked in his father's hand, "PEACHES," followed by these words underlined, "\$1 a piece!!"

Bonanza peaches. Get-rich-quick peaches. His father's peaches. His dead father. Bowie helped himself to a small sip of the whiskey.

He riffled the pages. Several pages back was the story of his father's attempt to grow alfalfa in a patch of alkaline soil near Tucson. Cost for seed, cost to wash the salt out of the earth. More cost for washing salt. Failure.

There was the general store in Tucson, wiped out in the great panic of '73. There was the tinned beef venture in Galveston, the prairie schooner attempt in Matagorda. Debits, debits, with the i's undotted. And no credits. The story of a man's life between thin blue lines on a yellow scrap of paper. Faithfully, every cent of his failures was listed here.

Bowie turned to the medical expenses. It gave him a perverse pleasure to do this. The list of failures disheartened him and left him dejected. The medical expenses always angered him and left him satisfied. They were listed under "Ranch, Miscellaneous." He checked the dates from the time he'd started sending money home to ease his mother's illness. There were a sprinkling of entries widely separated, then fewer, then none at all. The money he'd sent for his mother had been turned into peaches. His father had bet his mother's life on those peaches. His father had bet all their lives on those damn peaches. He took another drink and heard a buggy rattle into the yard.

Probably Murphy or Tote, or one of the other small

ranchers trying to get him to join the Ranchers' Committee and help clean the stolen stock out of these hills. He'd told Tote a week ago he'd think it over. He wasn't anxious to fight their battles, especially when their reluctance to help themselves showed so clearly in the length of time it was taking them to organize. Still, he'd seen the Malabar brand crudely worked over on several steers running wild in those hills.

He waited, the ledger open in front of him.

The knock at the door was firm, impatient. Bowie leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. "It's open," he said. "Come on in."

It wasn't Murphy. It wasn't Tote. It was the woman. The Wade woman. With her shadow she filled the room. He rose too quickly. That woman made him nervous. She came in swiftly carrying the gun and belt he had given Mica this afternoon. Wordlessly she dumped them on the table in front of him. Her eyes jumped from his face to the ledger, to the whiskey bottle.

"He's never coming over here any more," she said.

"A boy needs a gun, ma'am. I didn't mean any harm."

"You think I want my boy raised to be a gunslinger like the rest of these hoodlums here?"

"Everyone wears a gun here, ma'am," he said mildly. "Won't hurt him none to learn to use a gun proper. What's bad is not learning proper. Or not being allowed to have a gun when there's nothing else in the world you want so much."

"You're one to talk!"

"I am, ma'am. My Paw was something like you. He wouldn't let me have a gun either." He stared at her steadily, driving the point in. He watched her softly freckled face redden, her breathing quicken.

"I apologize, ma'am, for doing something you don't approve of." Carefully he folded the cartridge belt around

the holster. "The boy needs a father. Trailing every old he-goat around like he's been doing me can get him in trouble. You're right there."

Her shoulders slumped. "I came over here prepared to be furious with you. Now you make me feel—" she stopped, her face pale as if the effort of saying this was costing her too highly. Suddenly she straightened and looked at him frankly.

She wasn't a brazen woman but there was truly an urgent need in her. He remembered his father's words that day in the wash at the bottom of Pick-'em-up Grade. "Not a good match for Travis . . . They aren't suited . . . Not a bad woman but too much talk about that woman." He remembered Mica: "What's a bold glance?" He recalled the way the Mexicans looked at her. They said a Mexican could smell it. He remembered the way she'd been that day she tried to scalp him. There was a need in her, all right.

"How long's your husband been dead?" he asked softly.

"More than three years."

"How did he die?"

"As far as my son knows it was a mine cave-in. It wasn't!" She looked at him defiantly, a strong, well-boned, handsome figure of a woman who was stirring his blood in the juice of old memory. "He was killed in a drunken, useless gunfight."

Bowie moved around the table and stood in front of her. Very close, hovering over her. She put a hand on one hip to steady herself. Her face deepened with color. She blinked deep blue eyes that were afraid and yet not afraid. Her breasts lifted rapidly, round and full-fleshed, pushing strongly against the cloth of her dress. One hand gripped the table, fingers whitening, fingers that could scratch and tear, and then stop.

He wanted to touch her, pet her, like he would a dog

or a cat. Bold? No. Vulnerable? Yes, vulnerable like a dumb beast. Like himself.

She closed her eyes, lips quivering, waiting. Three years without a man, he thought. Silently he moved on past her to the stove.

"Coffee, ma'am," he said gently.

She put her hands to her face.

"Yes, please!" She took the cup gratefully, avoiding his glance. "Am I—am I so wicked?" she whispered.

"I'm not the person to ask."

"I don't know any more. I don't." She was looking at the floor. "After Reuben died I had no place to go. No real home to go to. I don't like doing for myself. It doesn't agree with me." She dabbed a finger at the corner of her eye, swiftly. "I want a chance to live like a woman. I don't want to worry every day about the stock, the butter, and the amount of ice in the cellar. I want to make a home and live in it with a man of my own and have time to raise my son proper."

"Why are you telling me this, ma'am? You think I'm going to spoil it?"

"I don't know."

"Like the pies? Bribing me with those?"

"The pies? Oh, those." She put a hand up to her red hair, smoothing it. She smiled shyly. "Didn't you like them?"

"I liked them fine."

She was blushing. God, she was red and pink and white! And soft and warm and desirable, and vulnerable—and his brother's woman.

"Tell me where Travis is?" he said, his voice thickening. "I'll write him. I guarantee nothing will happen to him."

"No, I can't." She set the coffee down, unable to face him.

The whiskey and the nearness of the woman turned his

knees to butter. He grasped her arms and shook her into looking at him. "Tell me for your own sake!"

"No, dear God, no! I'm afraid!" Her blue eyes were not afraid. They were wide, ready—waiting.

He wanted to stroke that fine red hair. To touch her, to caress the exciting richness of her flesh, to grow soft and weak inside those round white arms. Imperceptibly she moved against him. His arms slipped around her.

"Bowie," she said, her head coming harshly against his chest, tears staining her eyes. Her hands sought the small of his back. Her firm warm thighs sized themselves against his own trembling legs. "Oh, Bowie! Dear God, Bowie!"

His hands ran gently over the supple arch of her back. He was taking someone else's woman. His brother's betrothed. But he was remembering her change up there on the rocks; he was remembering his father's words, "She won't be good for Travis." He was thinking, For Travis' sake, I'll find out. For Travis . . .

He told himself, Stop lying, Bowie.

"Bowie!" The woman was urgent as time itself.

Bitterly, unevenly, he said, "Name like a knife." His hands sank roughly, hungrily, into that great, overpowering, velvety enigma.

PART THREE

**A S K Y**





"THERE SHE IS," A.J. Dunit said proudly, pointing a small slim finger straight ahead as if he were now revealing one of the great scenic wonders of the West.

"Dodge City?"

"Yep. A real big dipper of a cowtown four or five years ago."

"You reckon he's there?" Travis said wearily.

"Don't know," A.J. grinned at him. "Don't matter none. Dodge is still a good town. Let's go." He spurred his tired horse into a lope toward the silver ribbons of rail, running into the blurred outlines of store buildings to the south.

To Travis, Dodge City looked much like the other cowtowns they'd approached these last three months. Bigger maybe, that was all. There were the railroad tracks, the holding pens, the long line of wooden stores and saloons facing the tracks, the herds of cattle streaming out beyond the town like a red ocean wave flooding the grass.

It had the houses too, the big white frame houses with the small fenced plots of farmland just outside town; the small white frame houses with a garden and a shade tree in the town proper; all of them promising the warm happy sound of a woman and children. If it hadn't been for the houses he might have turned and headed back for Arizona a long time ago.

Out of the corner of his eye, Travis watched the great change come over A.J. Dunit. He rode through the powdery dust down Front Street. He was riding the biggest horse he could find and he stiffened to his full height in the saddle. He was no longer a nameless, merry, squinch-faced, talkative little man with a garland of shriveled ears in his warbag. His face had become a cold, silent, unsmiling mask, and it would remain so for the duration of their stay in this town, as it had been in all the other towns they'd entered.

In front of the telegraph office they dismounted and went inside. It was part of a ritual. The little Dodge City telegrapher had no word from Forge and Corril, the two cattlemen in Cheyenne. The tautness left Travis' face.

They moved along the manure-spattered boardwalk to the sheriff's office. A.J. walked slowly and carefully, his eyes shifting swiftly from side to side. It was always surprising how many people knew him by sight in these towns, how many of them would look at him and look away quickly, unwilling to be noticed.

The sheriff was a big, stolid man with a dark, drooping mustache, cold fish eyes, and tobacco stains on his vest. In every town he looked the same. In every town he talked the same.

No, he hadn't seen the man they were seeking. He remembered him, all right. Who could forget a man that tall with a face all welted up. He'd been working here a year or two ago at Turko's Crazy Owl. Hadn't been back since. "I've had my eye out for him these past three months since I heard. Sure, I'll get in touch with your people in Cheyenne should I see him. You going to stay here long?"

"No," A.J. said.

The sheriff seemed relieved. Then, almost apologetically, "Sorry, A.J., I'll have to ask you to check your guns while you're here."

A.J. hard-eyed the sheriff until the latter smiled nervously and continued, "Town ordinance. I didn't make it, but I got to enforce it. I'll have to ask you to co-operate, A.J." The sheriff's smile was all tallow and no beef.

"Why not?" A.J. said coldly.

They unbuckled their guns and laid them on his desk.

The look of the law, the sound of the law. It was a travesty, an organization of flesh and blood designed solely to furnish information on one man's whereabouts.

The sheriff's word, however, was never good enough for A.J. They went down to the livery stable. The man there hadn't seen Bowie either. Next, Travis knew, they'd go to the three largest whorehouses in town, and finally the three biggest saloons. Only then would A.J. be convinced Bowie wasn't in town and hadn't been seen recently.

He followed A.J. into Turko's Crazy Owl saloon. It was boisterous and shrill with piano, girls singing, men swearing. Stale beer, raw whiskey, rank tobacco stung Travis' nose. Running the length of one side of the room was the long shiny bar. In the rear was a piano and small stage with tables and chairs in front of them, and along the wall opposite the bar were the card tables, the faro, the keno goose.

Travis watched how quickly the bedlam muted momentarily and a strange, head-swinging alertness possessed every man in the room when A.J. entered. He sauntered slowly, casually, to the bar. Cold, silent little man, his small mouth twisting down purposefully, cruelly. He was completely aware of himself, aware of others. He was completely enjoying it. It chilled Travis to watch him react to a crowd and they to him.

A.J. ordered whiskey and Travis beer. A swart man in a black derby hat and checkered vest, his mustache a square black brush, his eyebrows black tufts over dark bloodshot eyes, sidled up alongside A.J. Dunit.

"Afternoon, Turko," A.J. said.

"What brings you back to Dodge, A.J.?"

"Looking for a man who used to deal for you. Name's Bowie Malabar."

"Bowie?" The man's dark eyes widened. "You're looking for Bowie?"

"Don't make me go over the same trail twice," warned A.J.

"He ain't here, A.J.," Turko said, turning away now, satisfied. "Hasn't been here in over a year."

A.J. dropped a hand on his arm. "This here's his brother, Turko. He's looking for him, too."

The swart-skinned man gave him a look of distaste and turned to the bartender. "Give them a drink," he said and moved away uncertainly.

He leaned against a wooden pillar and divided his attention between them and a girl playing the piano, her back to them. She was wearing a low-cut, tight red silk dress that displayed her shapely white back and the swell of her firm buttocks on the hard stool. After a moment Turko ordered a drink and went over to the gaming tables. He paused at the empty table of one of his dealers, a horse-faced man in a tall beaver and leaned over to whisper to him nodding in the direction of the bar.

Through the mirror on the back bar Travis saw him now leave the man in the tall beaver hat and weave his way unsteadily out of the saloon through the side door. The woman stopped playing to watch him leave.

A.J. nudged Travis and they went over to the table of the man in the beaver hat. They sat down.

"Lord bless you, gents," the man in the beaver said, cracking a new deck. "What's your pleasure? A little draw poker?"

"Your name?" A.J. said.

"Why—why, Preacher," the horse-faced dealer said.

"That's what folks call me. Ain't my real name. Ain't no preacher. You can see that."

"Bowie," A.J. said. "Bowie Malabar."

"Know him," the dealer said quickly. "Good friend of mine. He used to deal one shift. Me the other. How is he?"

"That's what we want to know."

"I haven't seen Bowie for almost two years now. What's he done? What kind of trouble's he in?"

"He killed his Paw," A.J. said. Travis frowned. A.J. had no right to bring that up before this man.

"Killed his Paw! Don't believe it."

"It's true."

Preacher turned questioningly to Travis. Travis looked away.

"I knew there was something tied up inside him," the dealer said softly. "He was always so locked in, so stone-faced." He reached under the table and brought up a whiskey bottle and a glass. He helped himself to a big drink. He shook his head. "Strange one, all right. But a good one. I'da sworn it, just scratched up and twisted in the guts, somehow. Killed his Paw!"

Three men moved down from the bar and took chairs at the table. They eyed A.J. nervously but boldly. The middle one was the youngest and the most nervous. "You dealing, Preacher," he said, "or you jest going to talk all afternoon?"

"Well, bless you, Ben." The Preacher looked inquiringly at A.J.

"Deal, Preacher," A.J. said, his lip hunching down, staring coolly at the youngest of the trio.

"Brethren," the Preacher said reverently, "I'm dealing." He rolled up his shirt sleeves revealing a tattooed "Mother" on one forearm, and "Love" on the other.

He set out a stack of chips in front of each man. He helped himself to another drink. He smacked his lips and

riffled the cards. He rocked his eyes up toward the ceiling. "All right, Daddy Bull," he intoned grandly, "we're going to play poker. Give all these miserable sons of misfortune your blessing. All right. Never mind. Amen."

"Deal! for Chrissakes!" the young man called Ben said.

"Deal," A.J. said.

"Hallelujah and amen, I feel you, Lord! Here I come, gents. Stud poker." Swiftly his long fingers flicked the down cards in front of each man.

It was a cold, grim game and something mean and sinister was passing between the young cowhand called Ben and A.J. Dunit. There was an unnecessary insolence in the way he spoke the name when he said, "I raise you, *A.J. Dunit*," or, "My pot, *A.J. Dunit*. The great *A.J. Dunit* loses again." The boy licked his lips and kept it up. But he was losing strength. After an hour's play A.J. was almost even. He cashed in and rose to leave. "Just a minute, *A.J. Dunit*," the boy called loudly after him. Everyone in the saloon stopped to watch. A.J. turned, rocking slowly on the balls of his feet.

"Yes?" he said softly.

The boy whitened. "I'll be here all afternoon," he said. "Tomorrow too."

A.J. jerked his head toward the bar. "They bottle guts for your kind right over there. Get some, then speak what's in your mind." He stared the boy down, his face a tight mean darkness. He turned on his heel and walked slowly out of the saloon. Travis started after him but a hand hooked his arm.

"Set a moment, friend," the long-faced Preacher said.

The game had broken up, the three men drifting sullenly away when A.J. left. Listlessly Travis sat down at the empty table.

"What you doing with that little killer?"

Travis shrugged. "Looking for Bowie."

"Did he really kill his Paw?"

"He did."

"That ain't why that little runt is after him though, is it?"

"No."

"I thought not. You shouldn't take up with that one. He ain't no good. You don't look like that kind. Why do you do it?"

"I've been up that trail."

"And?"

"I haven't come down yet."

Suddenly, the woman in the red dress who had been playing the piano was touching Preacher on the shoulder. "What happened here, Preacher?" she said. She wasn't looking at them, but over their heads, seeking someone else.

"Nothing, Jeanine. Another young glory seeker trying to rile A.J. Dunit. That's all."

Travis was involuntarily shocked into rising. The astonishment spread over his entire face as he looked at her.

He was carried back to Cheyenne three months ago, before he and A.J. had headed for Kansas and the cowtowns where Bowie had once worked. He was seeing the faces of Forge and Corril again, the two big cattlemen who had destroyed Old Cayo's sheep and were financing A.J.'s quest for Bowie: big powerfully built men in their early forties, their once sleekly jowled faces red-gashed horribly in a great circle around their noses and mouths. The scars were still deep and red and pustulant, still scabbing. It was as if someone had cruelly ripped a circle on their faces with barbed wire.

He was seeing it all again as he looked at this woman's face. Noticing his revulsion, she turned her back on him

and said scornfully, "You like this side better? The boys say I have the sweetest little manure chute this side of Kansas City."

"Easy, Jeanine," Preacher said. "Easy, honey."

Travis tried to mumble an apology. "I'm sorry, ma'am. You reminded me of someone."

She spun around, her long lustrous dark hair swinging angrily across her shoulders. "But this side you don't like? Stick around Dodge. You'll get used to it." Her eyes again moved swiftly about the big room.

"Truly, ma'am, I didn't mean to stare." But he was still staring. There was that mark on her: a pink circular scar exactly like those of Forge and Corril. Only older, much older. She would have been a beautiful woman but for that mark.

"Jeanine," Preacher said quietly, "you remember Bowie? This here's his brother."

"Bowie's brother?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Bowie's brother!" The anger was leaving her. She smiled briefly. She reached over and fondled the back of his neck. "You with the neck of a bull and eyes of a lamb?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ah, there was a man, your brother. Bowie would not stare at a woman like you—you men! He knew how to treat a woman." Her restless eyes would not set. "Why are you running with this little killing machine?"

"They're looking for Bowie," Preacher said.

"Go to the bar and get me a drink, Preacher. Two of them. You want one?"

"No thank you, ma'am," Travis said.

The Preacher rose and went to the bar.

"So the little pock-faced one wants the silent giant. Well, I do not fear for Bowie. He is the best, with the guns, the fists, the cards—with love."



"How do you know about—?"

"Love?" She laughed with a touch of bitterness. "Oh, ho, my little chicken. Not me, not me. I have friends in the houses."

"He went to the houses often?"

"But, of course. He was a man. Don't you?"

His face felt berry-red. "Of course."

"Of course. You are the giant's brother. Of course. So you don't like my face?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then you like it?"

"Ye—yes."

"You think you could sleep with me after seeing my face?"

"Why—why, yes," he said, startled.

"Oh, don't lie and don't worry so much. I won't ask you to sleep with me, my big bull neck. And nobody likes my face."

Preacher returned then and set two drinks in front of Jeanine. She drained them quickly and rose. "I must find Turko," she said. "He is in the Long Branch or some other place getting sick-drunk now, looking for a woman. I will bring him home and sober him up and we will fight and love and fight and love and—Jesus Christ! Goodbye, Bowie's brother with the bull neck who doesn't like my face." She started away swaying her hips violently. She turned back. "But you like that, don't you?"

"Ye—yes," he mumbled, not knowing what to say, even what she expected him to say.

Preacher followed her departure with troubled eyes. He dipped his big nose and shiny lips into his glass. "Brother, I'm lucky," he said. "Look at me. The good Lord gave me this nose, and these lips, this belly, these hands. By the Almighty Jehovah, I guess he wanted me to use them and by God, I guess the old bastard made 'em so big to be sure

I'd enjoy using them." He looked intently at Travis. "So let's use them, brother. Let's drink up and then let's go eat, and let's get us a woman and roll in the old bastard's bounty. Let's enjoy all the good things we can use 'em for."

Travis gaped wonderingly at the horse-faced dealer in the tall beaver hat. In all his life he had never heard a man so sacrilegious. Or was he sacrilegious?

Preacher downed his whiskey. "Lord, Lord," he said, that woman's got a problem."

"How'd she get that face?" Travis asked, unable to keep from it.

Preacher slumped back in his chair. "Turko took Jeanine out of one of these houses and married her. They were happy for maybe five years. Then it started. They began picking at one another for not having a child. Turko said it was Jeanine's fault. She said it was his. All the time both loving each other, but this thing nagging at them making them feel not normal. Turko even paid a woman to lay up with him and have his child. She couldn't conceive. Jeanine found out about it and went to sleeping with a man for the same reason. What's good for the gander is good for the goose. Well, Turko caught her. Them old time Turks had a barbaric way of treating an unfaithful woman. Know what they did? They marked them with a broken bottle. Permanently and forever. For everyone to see. Well, that's what Turko did to Jeanine. After that everything kind of went sour. Something in that woman died when her face was ruined. She went to drinking. Didn't care whether Turko caught her with another man or not." He sighed deeply. "She's like a daughter to me, that woman."

Travis stood up. He felt saddened and depressed, more depressed than he'd ever been in his whole life. In Texas, in Arizona, he had lived alongside violence, lust, filth, sin, but they had never moved him. Now, somehow, in the

dark shadowland of his quest for Bowie, they did. It was as if he were awakening from a deep sleep. Like a butterfly coming out of its chrysalis. Only his new world wasn't bright and sunshiny. It was dark and full of twisting, depthless shadows that fuddled a man's soul.

When had it started changing for him? When his skin had finally been pierced by those spoken and unspoken insults in that saloon in Charleston? When he'd spoken those bold words to Zoanna, making a decision totally unlike him and from which there was no retreating? There was no telling exactly. It had started changing, and a man had to chart his way carefully among the quicksands else he could be lost forever.

"Where you going?" Preacher asked.

"Damn," he said softly. Then, "Goddamn!" Unseeing he made his way towards the door of the saloon.



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING Travis and A.J. rode two miles south of town along the Arkansas River. Here A.J. circled a target on a cottonwood tree and began his daily practice. Travis hunkered down patiently in the early morning sun and watched.

Fifty feet from the tree A.J. commenced his shooting. Gradually he worked his way into an area fifteen feet from the tree. He drew with his right hand, then his left. He drew for speed; he drew for accuracy. He drew for speed *and* accuracy. Round after round he poured into the tree, the sound ear-deafening in the little glade. He shot upright; he shot from a crouch. He shot from his horse. Finally, in very close, he worked with his hideout gun, a two-shot derringer he always carried for emergencies, shelved neatly inside the right side of his right boot.

He was completely absorbed, grim, deadly, sweating. Once he had told Travis, "Don't ever bother me when I'm shooting. Don't even talk to me." And Travis hadn't. It always fascinated him. Every day for two hours the little man worked with his guns. It reminded Travis of Bowie years ago with his guns when he was going to be the best of them all. Practice, practice, practice. Just to be best. What made a man want to be best? What made it so necessary for some men? He'd had no answer before. He had none now.

"That does it," A.J. said, holstering his gun. "Your turn, Travis."

Travis marched out to face the tree. Low on his right hip in its greased holster was a Colt .45 Frontier Model. High on his left hip, bare, pin-rigged to a small metal plate was another, both guns selected for him by A.J. in Cheyenne three months ago. The front sights had been honed by A.J. so the guns would not hook in the holsters. The dogs controlling the hammers had been fined down for easier, smoother, pulling.

A.J. watched him work. "I'll be dipped, Travis. You're the clumsiest-handed man I ever saw. When your right hand goes down for that gun you're thumbing that hammer back as your gun comes out of the holster. Remember that. You're using the joint of your thumb, not the ball. You use the ball of your thumb, someday your hands are going to be sweating, they'll slip plumb off the hammer."

Travis drew. He fired. He sweated. A.J. grinned at him.

"Have I improved any?" Travis said.

"Some. Not much. I reckon you haven't got the hands or the reactions for it. From now on we'll work more on your left hand and that swivel gun. I figure that's your only chance of ever killing anybody. Get in closer now. That's not a very accurate weapon fixed like that."

Travis stood fifteen feet from the tree, his hands hanging loose, away from his sides. His left hand came up grasping the butt, thumbing the hammer back, straightening the barrel up. He pulled the trigger. The gun, swiveling easily on the metal plate attached to his belt, exploded along his waistline.

"Missed," A.J. said. "Again. Missed. Missed. Hit. Missed."

Travis stopped to reload. "I don't like this gun," he panted. "I don't like this way."

"Only way you got any chance."

"It don't seem—well, quite honest."

"It don't? You're facing your man head on. He can see you and your guns. He's not so smart, watching your right hand, thinking that gun on a swivel pin is like that so you can border-shift your guns easier, maybe, when your right gun is empty. He's watching your right hand; you go with the left. Gives you a fraction of a second head start. You're going to need every second you can get. Maybe that way you'll be able to get in a shot or two before he breaks you in two. It ain't accurate, that's why you got to get in close enough so you don't miss. I used it on my first kill. Word gets around though, it's no good after that."

"I—I just don't like it, A.J."

"You don't have to like it. You kill however you can. You ain't got any other hope. Now shoot." Travis' broad, thick hands slid awkwardly for the gun. "Miss. Miss. Hit. Miss. Miss. All right. That's enough."

They mounted their horses and A.J. grinned. "You just hope we don't find your brother for a long while yet. That's your only chance. I don't know why I work so hard with you. You're the most unlikely gunslinger I ever saw in all my life."

"Why, then, A.J.? Why?"

"Maybe it's because there's something about you makes me laugh. Be quite a joke to teach you enough so you could kill as handy a man as your own brother. Some joke."

"Yeah," said Travis.

It was almost noon when they reached town. They ate lunch at the hotel and then they made the rounds of the soiled doves seeking information on Bowie. This was always the part of the quest that A.J. seemed to like best.

He'd spend a half-hour to an hour in each of the three largest places while Travis waited for him in the anteroom with the giggling, smirking, painted women.

When he came out Travis would say, "Any news?"

"No. What you been doing?"

"Waiting."

"Just waiting? That's all?"

"Yes." He'd feel his face heating up.

A.J. would shake his head. "You're a one, all right, boy. I just hope we don't find your brother too soon. All expenses paid." His dark eyes shone. "We ain't never lived this high on the hog before."

It was late afternoon when they stopped at the bar of Turko's Crazy Owl saloon for a drink.

"You see that fellow called Ben was making all that big talk yesterday?" A.J. said, looking straight ahead at the bar mirror. Travis turned slowly. Jeanine was playing the piano to a half-empty house. Only a few of the gambling tables were busy. He spotted Preacher's high beaver hat, at a table with the young cowhand and his two companions of yesterday.

"He's here," Travis said. "Playing poker. He sees you."

"I think I'm going to have trouble with that boy," A.J. said tight-lipped. "I checked up on him last night. A busted britches from down county. Shot up a couple of old, worn-out gunhands. Thinks he's real quick now. Out to make a reputation."

"Come on, A.J., let's get out of here. You have nothing against that fellow."

"I got my reputation. He told everyone he'd be here today. Let's see."

A.J. glided quickly and easily through the welter of tables and chairs to Preacher's table. He sat down silently as every eye in the house followed him.

Travis took a beer and slipped into a chair at a nearby



table. The boldness and talkativeness of young Ben were gone today. Except for an occasional "Praise the Lord, and pass the money, brothers" from Preacher, hardly a word was spoken. An atmosphere of intense waiting hovered over the slithering cards.

Jeanine, at the piano, seemed to sense this. She stopped playing, and came over to Travis' table. She smiled, the great circular scar rising on her face. "Hello, my little bull neck. You are back."

"Please join me," Travis said.

"And why not? Your friend, the little killing machine, is here too. Trouble?"

"I don't know." Travis looked worried. "I hope not." He changed the subject trying to be pleasant. "Where's your husband?"

"Gone, dead, asleep in bed already. Finished by his whiskey.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," she said. "I spoke very badly to you. It was the whiskey talking. You will forgive me, nice young bull neck?"

"Certainly. It wasn't your fault."

"But, of course it was. Ahh, you have such a nice, good, plain face. A strong face. You would make nice babies, no? With strong bull necks. Are you married?"

"No."

"You should be, with a face like that. And have many children."

"I was supposed to be."

"Ahh! What happened?"

"Bowie—"

"Ahh, the Bowie. You are Bowie's brother. Your name?"

"Travis. And yours—Jeanine?"

"Jeanine. Yes."

"Jeanine, Jeanine, it's a beautiful name. Is it French?"

"But, of course. My mother was French, my father—?" she snapped her fingers. "Who knows?" She laughed. "Let us drink champagne and celebrate. Bowie's brother Travis, with the bull neck, and little Jeanine with the scar face." She signaled one of the white-aproned bartenders over and he soon returned with two stemmed glasses and the champagne in an iced silver bucket. She poured champagne in both their glasses.

"Drink, baby face," she said, "to me and you, and Bowie, and Turko, and the little killing machine." She drank hers down in one gulp. Travis sipped the bubbly, cidery liquid, not enjoying it at all but afraid of hurting her feelings if he didn't drink it.

Her eyes drifted to Preacher's table and the game in progress. She drank swiftly and steadily and silently now that the feverish gaiety had so quickly passed. She studied Travis. "How is my face now?" she said. She traced a finger over the wide circular scar. "The champagne makes it redder, no?"

"I hadn't noticed."

She laughed. "My God, how you men lie! But you know, I think I like you, Travis. You are not like these other men I see every day. There is something quiet and kind about you." She stood up eying him quizzically. "I'm tired of sitting here waiting for something to happen. Waiting for one man to kill another. There are better things to do. No? Shall we go somewhere else where there is less noise and drink more champagne and—talk some more?"

"If you wish."

"Go out the front then. I'll meet you at the side. My bull-necked innocent."

Casually she drifted off toward the bar and Travis rose to go out the front door.

"Travis!" He heard A.J.'s voice call. "Excuse me a mo-

ment, gents." A.J. left his table and stepped over to Travis.

"Be careful. She's a queer one."

"All we're going to do is go somewhere quiet and talk."

"Yeah? Her old man is damn mean."

"We're only going to talk, I told you. Listen, A.J., you don't have to watch me all the time like a little child. I'm a grown man."

"You're my insurance, lad. I got to watch you. You're only going to talk, huh?" A.J. grinned. "Well, go ahead, grown man. Maybe you need some of that kind of talk." A.J. returned to the table as Travis stomped angrily out of the saloon.

He picked up Jeanine at the side of the building. She handed him a towel-covered wicker basket.

"Be careful," she said, "the bubbles are inside."

She led him across the dimly lit street to a large two-story frame house. At the back door a tiny colored man let them in. A great fat blonde greeted Jeanine warmly and led them upstairs to a small room with only a bed and a table in it.

"Ahh, this is not better?" Jeanine said when the fat woman had left. "No noise, no music. Pour the champagne, *chéri*, while I change into something more comfortable. This tight dress is killing me."

Travis struggled with the cork on the bottle. When it finally popped, Jeanine was in her slip. His hand trembled as he poured her a drink.

Off came the slip. She stood there white, pink, a cup of black.

"What—what are you doing?"

"The face is not so important any more. No?" She turned for him. "You like?" She came very close against him. Her hand brushed him. He jumped back and she laughed.

"Have you never been with a woman?" she said softly.

"Of course."

"Many?" She watched his face tighten and richen with blood.

"Ye—yes."

She sat on the edge of the bed, the champagne glass in her hands. "Then come make yourself comfortable, *chéri*. Off with the clothes. I will not be so cruel any more."

He was quivering. He looked at the light.

"Oh, that? You want it out?" She was laughing silently. She blew it out. He stood in the darkness, disgust and shame welling within him. Disgust, that he should feel this swollen need. Shame, because he had been insulted by both A.J. and Jeanine concerning his ability with women. Shame, too, because he had felt the need to lie about it.

He stepped out of his clothes, trying to stop the trembling. There was still time to run. Three months ago he would have run. He should run now.

"Come, *chéri*," she said. She was standing against him, pressed tight against his blood-bursting thighs. She giggled. "Come, *chéri*, quick!"

The sheets were cool against his prickly, shuddering skin. Her flesh was warm and insistent. His hands were big, stiff and clumsy as they fumbled with her breasts and stroked her long, white thighs. Then he was kissing her strongly, hungrily.

"Easy, *chéri*, easy. Do not be rough. That is not your way . . . Not so fast. Please, please . . . Ahh, *chéri*, the bull jumped over the moon." She leaned back sighing. He collapsed in a pool of perspiration, exhausted.

"I'm sorry," he said brokenly. "I'm very sorry."

"It is not your fault," she said gently. "I could make a lover out of you."

"I don't know what came over me."

"I did."

He lay back and stared vacantly at the ceiling, unable to look at her now.

"Are you angry with me?" she said.

"No."

"Travis of the bull neck. You're nice. So fast—but nice."

"I'm sorry." He felt the shame again. He had been no good. He had had one woman before this one. Zoanna. Just once. He'd been no good then, too. He hadn't thought about that then. It hadn't bothered him then.

His hand sought the woman again, feeling the silky smooth swell of belly and breast.

"Easy, *chéri*." Her fingers moved on him like the tines in the devil's pitchfork. "So soon?" Her laugh was the purl of slow creek water. "Bull-quick, bull-ready, bull neck." She rolled him over. Her fingers gouged his broad back. "Make me a woman!" she said savagely.



THE POKER GAME had been in progress well over four hours when Travis returned to Turko's Crazy Owl. He ordered a beer at the bar and wet his dry lips with foam. The young cowhand Ben was out of chips, sitting quietly, morosely, drinking whiskey in short quick bursts. His two companions were also low on chips. Only A.J. and Preacher seemed to have any substantial stake in front of them.

A.J. raked in another pot. "That's enough for me," one of the men said to Preacher. "Cash me in."

"I ain't never seen that kind of luck," the second said disgustedly. "Me too."

A.J. watched the Preacher change the few chips into silver. "That's the most noise you made all day," A.J. said, stacking his own chips for the change-in. "You gents ain't made near the bellow you made yesterday."

Young Ben wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Git on home to bed, sonny," A.J. said. "Game's over."

"What'd you say?" Ben said huskily.

"I said it was past your bedtime—sonny!"

The boy's jaw pulsed in and out. He gripped his half-empty whiskey glass till his knuckles were white. He rose slowly and flung the contents straight into A.J.'s face. He stood there trembling, sweat beading his forehead. Every man in the saloon trembled with him. This was the moment

for which they had been so patiently waiting all day long. For an instant Travis thought A.J. was going for his hideout gun. Slowly, A.J. straightened up. Carefully, deliberately, he wiped his face. He wiped his hands. Not for an instant did he take his eyes off Ben.

"All right, sonny," he said in a cold, flat voice. "You been asking for it. Go get your guns."

"Not in the saloon, not here," the bartender protested. "It's against the law."

"I'll meet you at the city limits in five minutes," A.J. said, "if your stomach holds together that long."

Ben brushed past the restraining hands of his two companions, got his guns at the bar where he'd checked them, and pushed out of the saloon.

A few moments later A.J. Dunit followed him out. Then all the men came streaming out of the saloon, carrying candles and lanterns. It was a weird, funereal spectacle they made when they reached the edge of Dodge City, and formed two lines parallel to the gunfighters, their lights, buzzing with bugs, shedding a ghostly yellow flicker over the scene.

A.J. Dunit took a stance thirty feet from the boy. His mouth was thin, turned down. "Any time, boy," he said icily. "Start your draw."

Ben stood motionless, a strange, trapped look in his eyes. His hands hung out from his sides. He had difficulty holding them still.

"How many men I killed, Travis?" A.J. called out loudly. "Twenty-eight, twenty-nine? This glory hound going to make thirty?"

Travis made no answer. He knew none was expected of him. A.J. was deep in his role now, trying to scare the boy, paralyze him, trip his nerves, break the practiced rhythm of his reflexes.

"Ain't you ever going to draw, sonny? You had a



stomach back there. Different now though, when you're really facing A.J. Dunit. Not an old tired gunhand now, and not with words or whiskey or fists. A.J. Dunit, boy. I'm your man—nutless little alley rat!"

The words crackled like rifle shots down the shadowy lanes of spectators. The boy licked his lips. His glance darted once toward his two companions buried deep in the crowd. Then his right hand dove for his gun.

A.J.'s move was a murmur, a gasp from the old men watching. He stroked off two shots before the boy's gun cleared his holster. Both shots went home, pumping the boy back ten feet onto the flat of his back. He lay there, flapping for a moment like a fish on dry land, as the blood spilled out of his belly and chest into the dirt.

A.J. stood over him. "Hallelujah and amen! You're sure enough on your way to glory now." A.J. whipped out his sheath knife. He leaned over the dead boy's head. There was a rising swell of disapproval from the crowd. A.J. rose.

"Anyone object, step out and say so."

No one objected.

He bent again. In one quick swipe he had the ear. He wrapped it in the boy's bandanna and shoved it in his pocket. Silently he walked through the lines of people, not turning his head in either direction.

Travis followed him back to town. At the Crazy Owl Travis ordered a double shot of whiskey. When he had downed it he returned to the hotel and went to bed.

He was still awake, staring at the ceiling, hours after A.J. had fallen into an easy, peaceful sleep.

He turned on the rack agonizing over the events of this turbulent day, staring at the blackness of the ceiling until it changed to gray.

He saw again the woman with the scarred face, her long white legs parting, the black devil's cup beckoning. "Make

me a woman! Make me a woman!" Soft, warm, melting. He was on the road to hellfire.

He saw Zoanna, his wife-to-be, her soft white legs also spreading, beckoning. He sat bolt upright. How had that happened? He hadn't thought of that for so long. How? His tortured mind groped back.

She had been showing him her old family album, pictures of husband, son, relatives, sitting on the edge of her bed. Yes! He remembered now. They had been talking of the problems of raising a boy.

"The boy should have a father." He'd spoken at last what had been in his mind for so long.

"Yes," she'd said, and briefly, almost accidentally, her hand touched his, the album slipping out of her lap. The freckles were a tawny, bronze streak across her nose. He could trace the pattern of each tiny splotch of burnt flesh as they advanced on him. They were engulfing him. He closed his eyes tightly and found his mouth pressing hers. Her arms tightened around him. He felt himself trembling, swelling beside her, ashamed. He rose quickly, and she was standing too, pressed hard against him. Against his rising shame. He tried to release her, but she wouldn't budge, remaining meshed tight against his shame. Her strong fingers unhooked a button on his shirt. An inquiring hand slipped along his belly, around his back. He was panting with blood and rising heat, and this shivering, maddening excitement. Somehow she stumbled and they fell back into the bed. Pressed close, soft and close, and gasping warm, and then—and then—he'd been like a crazed, thrashing animal.

When it was over he'd risen, red-faced, paralyzed, sure she'd never speak to him again. Instead, amazingly, she was smiling, her eyes enormous, glowing.

"We'll get married now, won't we, Travis?" The tiny

flush of freckles across her nose sparkled and burned against that pale flesh.

"Yes," he said humbly. "Of course."

"I love you, Travis," she whispered.

"I love you too, Zoanna," he mumbled. It was done.

But dear Lord, he'd been no good. No good with Zoanna, though that was the last thing he'd thought of then. No good with Jeanine. No good, no good, no good! The road to hellfire. Pride, damnation, and hellfire!

Outside it was daylight. In the next bed A.J. opened one eye and winked at him and smiled. And went back to sleep. Travis looked at the little man so innocent and boyish lying there, his garland of ears lying on the floor among his guns. Is this what Bowie had become? At that moment he felt he could have strangled the nameless little man in his sleep.



MICA stood on Table Top Rock and hurled the small cracked hand mirror far out over the valley. It spun crazily and glintingly against the clear blue dome of the sky and then dropped slowly into the greening San Pedro Valley, to shatter in fine pieces against the sharp, jagged sides of the rock.

Mica stared gloomily at the low white structure in the distance that was Paddy Murphy's house. They were no longer best friends. They would never signal each other again. Mica sighed mournfully.

So much had happened, he thought, since that tall man with the stone-grave, ugly, welshed face, and the name like a knife, had ridden into the valley eight months ago. So much had changed since Billy the Kid had devoured Murietta high on this rock on that warm fall day last year. Paddy had started changing then, too. But that wasn't the reason they weren't still best friends. Well, he thought, if Paddy wasn't his best friend anymore, Bowie was. He was almost nine now, infinitely older and wiser—and sadder.

He wondered if his mother was doing what he and Paddy had seen Appolonio and his girl doing in the grass by the river, bare legs churning madly, Appolonio goggle-eyed, heaving like a bull. No, no. He pushed the picture

from his mind. That was Paddy's idea. That was part of why they were no longer friends.

He had struck Paddy, Paddy had said awful things. "She's wicked," he'd said. "My Maw told Paw your Maw's a bad woman. Says she's laying up with Travis' brother like them Mexicans we saw here at the river. Says she rings her Indian bell, ain't no one going to hear her now. Says she's wicked. She's a Jezebel. She's—"

Mica had leaped upon him, bearing him to the ground. He'd straddled his chest, pounding his face with his small fists. "Take that back! Take it back!"

His nose bleeding, his round face red and puffing, Paddy had finally taken it back.

Mica let him up. They'd turned their backs on each other and gone their separate ways.

Paddy had no business telling lies, thought Mica. Just because he was mad over Murietta getting beaten by Billy the Kid. I'm glad he's not my friend, he told himself, frowning. Lying little chicken. He tried to imagine his mother lying flat on her back with Bowie astride her like Appolonio had been on the Mexican girl. He couldn't. *Bowie wouldn't do a thing like that to my Maw.* Not the man who'd cautioned him on taking better care of his horse, and all other dumb animals that couldn't talk back. Not the man who'd told him how lucky he was to have such a fine mother to take care of him, and that he should always love and respect her, like all women. *Bowie's strong and good, not like that little chicken-hearted liar of a Paddy Murphy.* He was even convinced now that old man Malabar was a bad man and Bowie had a good reason for killing his father. When he'd asked his mother if Mr. Malabar hadn't been really a bad man, even she had said, "Who's to say who's good and who's bad, what's right and what's wrong? Not me, Mica."

His forehead furrowed. So very much had changed since

that warm fall day last year when Billy the Kid had devoured Murietta up here on Table Top Rock. There had been that gun that Bowie had given him. That was queer, too. He had ridden home that evening with the old gun happier than he'd ever been in his whole life. His first real gun! His mother had been furious, though. She'd snatched the gun from him and gone riding back toward the Malabar ranch. He expected never to see the gun again. He was sick with hurt. In the dark he cried, unable to sleep. Later, very much later, he heard his mother return. She didn't light a lamp. She laid something heavy and metallic on the table.

When he was sure she was asleep he crawled out of bed through the shafts of moonlight and touched the rough leather and smooth moon-glowing metal barrel. For the rest of the night he couldn't sleep either. In the morning it was still there. He could have the gun, his mother had said, smiling mysteriously, but he must be careful and follow Bowie's instructions and the only time he could wear it was when he went to see Bowie. He was so amazed and elated he didn't pause to puzzle his mother's strange behavior. He hung the gun on the wall over his bed where Doc Brown's old stethoscope had once hung. He didn't tell anyone but he always kept one bullet in it in case Indians came. He was in constant torment until he was allowed to go and see Bowie. But his trips were growing infrequent. His mother took the pies now, not Mica, and most of the time she wouldn't let him come along. For a while she made steady visits, then stopped abruptly, then started again. It was funny. After visiting Bowie she grew less nervous and irritable. She didn't turn and toss and talk in her sleep. When she stopped going, her spells came back. When she went again they ceased.

"I promised Travis I'd help look after things," she explained to Mica. "There's lots of things about that ranch

and this valley Bowie doesn't know about. I don't trust that Compadre."

He didn't know what she did when she went there but she sure stayed a long time. One thing, though, she was more contented and happier than he had ever seen her.

Bowie, too, had changed. In a way this was the strangest part of all. Before, he would hardly go near those peaches on Barbacomori Creek. Now, he was there in the little orchard almost all the time. He wasn't so grave or quiet as he used to be either. He taught Mica how to handle a gun. He even promised him a new horse for his ninth birthday. He didn't even seem extra tall any more. And those times when that hard immobile face did soften into a smile it was no longer ugly. Mica couldn't figure out how he'd ever been scared of this man.

He wished the Ranchers' Committee would stop fooling around and clean up the rustlers and killers in the hills. It had been almost a year since Joe Gormand and Leland Wright had been slain—and forgotten, till Marsh Artz was killed just last week. That made seven in one year, just around here.

He wished, too, he could see Bowie today. But his mother had said they might go in to Tombstone and see the new play at the Opera House. Mica threw a rock far out into the valley.

He had gone with them once. He had seen the way the people stared and talked in low whispers when they saw his mother with the tall, welt-faced man. After that Mica never went again. Not even when they asked him. Watching the people stare at his mother and Bowie and talk about them behind their backs didn't make him feel good.

Even at school he had begun to hear things. They were lies! he cried at himself. Lies! lies! lies! Like that chicken-liar, Paddy Murphy, who couldn't stand to see his old tarantula beaten!



He stood up uncertainly. He looked at the far-off mountains with the savage desert country of Mexico just behind them. He didn't know what to do. He was bored. There were two hours of afternoon left yet. He would have liked to join the Ranchers' Committee and help battle the bad men. He wanted to see Bowie and do some practice shooting. He wanted—

He thought of his mother lying flat on her back. "Liar!" he said aloud. "Goddamn liar!"

He picked up a handful of rocks and threw them silently and steadily into the valley.

She was breathing deeply. He could almost taste her breath. He could smell apples and cinnamon in it.

"They're beautiful, Bowie," she said. "Everything's so beautiful here."

"Everything," he said, opening his eyes.

By turning his head in her lap he could see the small cabin leaning against a cottonwood, and the fence line of the peach orchard just below it. Pink, flowing umbrellas of blossoms covered the small trees and showered their fading petals onto the spring green earth. Behind him in the shadows of the Huachuca Mountains, Barbacomori Creek murmured and gurgled on the flat smooth rocks.

"I get so tired of looking at these ugly mountains all the time," she said, "and this grass and sand and mesquite. It's—it's like an oasis here." Her fingers moved slowly and tenderly along the ridged welts on his cheek and forehead. "Do the sight-seers bother you?"

"Not any more." The earth was warm under the blanket on which they lay. Little leafs of sun and shadow filtered through the big cottonwood above, falling lightly on them and the picnic hamper.

"In just two more months there'll be fruit on those trees," he said drowsily.

"I hope so."

"What do you mean, you hope so?"

"Nothing."

"Of course there will. They're three years old now. Not much fruit but some, anyhow. You know they got a dollar apiece last year in town for apples."

"Your peaches should do as well. No fresh fruit within two hundred miles of here." Suddenly she sounded tired.

He smiled up at her. "They will do well. Real well." He laid a hand on her red hair and pulled her head down. He kissed the soft full lips, tasting faintly the creek coolness of fresh milk, the stiff saltiness of fried chicken, the cinnamon sweetness of apple pie.

"Oh, Bowie," she said huskily, "Bowie. Let it be like this always. Let's never move from this spot. Let's—"

He kissed her again. A hand slid along the melon ripeness of breast. "You talk too much," he said.

He sat up quickly, grasping his knees, desire melting completely away. *Let it be like this always.* A shadow had wedged between them. Travis' woman. Travis' betrothed. It was always there, always waiting. You could keep it shut out only so long.

She was rigid and silent behind him, his change communicated quickly to her. Tentatively she reached out a hand to touch him, and let it fall.

After a moment she said to his broad back, "I've heard talk they're not going to let your peaches bear."

The back stiffened.

"I saw Billy Clanton last week. I dragged it out of him."

"Who's going to keep them from bearing?"

She spoke rapidly, nervously. "The Clantons, the McLowrys, the big men in this valley. Billy says if those peaches bear, every sodbuster this side of Kansas City will be homesteading in this valley. Then what will happen to the grasslands, to the cattle?"

"I've got the peaches fenced good."

"They can bust a wooden fence."

"Yes, I reckon they can."

"Why, Bowie," she asked angrily, "why are men like that? Your peaches are just a speck of land in this valley. Why won't they leave you alone?"

"Billy gave you the reasons," he said coldly. "Some men can't leave anything alone. Bigger they are, bigger they want to be." He grunted through pursed lips. "Paw should have heard you now. His last damn dream."

"Why doesn't the Ranchers' Committee clean out these rustlers and hard-cases that do old man Clanton's dirty work?"

"The Ranchers' Committee! They're little people, Zoanna. They're scared of guns, and the men that use them." He laughed low, bitter-deep in his throat. "Ever since I've been here they've been trying to get organized. They're afraid. They'll be stolen dead before they wake up."

"Bowie, you've worked hard for these peaches, haven't you?"

"Most of the work's been done by the Mexican hands, the weeding, irrigating, cleaning out the bugs. Don't give me none of your credit."

"You've been here almost every day."

"Who would have believed I'd ever climb off my horse to work on the land like a common sodbuster?" He shrugged, puzzled. "Never believed I'd ever work with woollies either, once."

"A man can change," she said.

"Maybe," he said. He was looking out over the blossom-shrouded orchard. "Never thought I'd have any feeling for those peaches," he said quietly, "but I do. It's not a bad feeling working with the land. Making things grow."

"That's what Travis liked. And your father too."

"Not Paw. He was always looking for the main chance. That's all those peaches were to him."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," but his forehead was cramped into a frown.

"Bowie!" she whispered. She drew his head down against her breast. She ran her hand over that dark hair.

"A man did change," she said.

"Zoanna, Zoanna." There was that old, lost look in his eyes again. "The only women I ever knew were cow-town women. Whores."

"Shh, Bowie. Shh."

"I'm sorry. You see I'm still not used to talking in public yet."

"It's all right, Bowie, I've heard lots worse."

"I never knew there were any other kind of women, Zoanna. That's not really true. I knew. But you don't get a chance to meet them when you've led the life I have. Always moving. Always—" Her fingers were feathery, warming on his face.

"I'm talking too much," he said.

"You're a talker, Bowie."

"Look at all the years I've had to save up."

She was laughing and he was too, softly, the corners of his broad mouth tugging upward, the teeth unclenching at last. Then he was kissing her, easy and hard, his hands moving urgently along the curving sweep of her body.

"I—I love you, Bowie," she whispered. His eyes were huge, fathomless. "You're not the first man I've ever said that to, but this is the only time it's ever made sense. I didn't want to, I fought it as hard as I could. I'm such a poor fighter on things like this. Oh, Bowie, I love you. I love you, I do!"

"Don't say that! You're not in love with me. It's something else. Not love. You're in love with Travis."

"I'm not."

"DID APPOLONIO and Julio fix a good supper, Mica?" Zoanna asked.

"Yes, ma'am." He was seated cross-legged on the floor, staring at the spitting flames in the fireplace.

"What did you have to eat?" She hung up her shawl and began to hum an old, almost forgotten song from her childhood days in Ohio.

"Same old stuff. Beans and chili, beef meat."

"Do you like eating with Appolonio and Julio?" she asked quietly.

He shook his head. "All they ever talk about is food and girls. Mostly girls."

She smiled. "And you don't like that? Wait till you get older."

"Not me!"

"All right. You'll see." She began humming again. "Did you build the fire?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're getting to be a right handy little man, Mica." She bent over and kissed him on the cheek. He flinched slightly.

"Boy—what's bothering you tonight?"

He squirmed uneasily on the floor.

"All right, son. All right, now."

"Well—why don't we go to church any more, like we used to?"

"It's a long way to town, Mica."

"Other folks here in the valley go."

"I didn't know you liked church so much, Mica. Do you want to go tomorrow?" He shifted weight restlessly. "What made you bring church up, Mica? Why'd you ask why we don't go any more?"

He shrugged.

"Why, Mica?" she persisted.

"I wondered was it because what people say about —us?"

"Child! What do they say?" She kneeled in front of him.

The boy fidgeted, seeking words. "Kids say you don't have any stock stolen because you're friendly to all the rustlers and outlaws in this valley."

"But I do have stock stolen."

"Not as much as anyone else."

"Well, you know I'm not friendly to all the rustlers and outlaws in this valley. Just think. Who have you ever seen here?"

"Billy Clanton." He spoke quickly.

"Just him?"

"Yes."

"Just one man. Is that all the rustlers and outlaws—One man? What else do they say?"

"They say it'd serve us right if the Indians got us."

"All the Apaches are on the reservation now. What else?" she asked coldly.

"That's—that's all, Mama."

He was lying. She knew it. How cruel children could be to one another. What else did he know? What else have these good, pious people said about her in front of their kids?

She watched the boy's face as he pretended absorption in the fire. He had the same high wide forehead as his father. The same small, spare-fleshed nose. The eyes were different, though. They were clear, frank, without waver; there was no hint in them of that furtive, fanatic glint of Reuben's, veiling the whiskey itch and gold colic that had possessed him so completely. Yet sometimes she imagined she detected an odd, wild quality to the boy. She didn't blame this on Reuben, however. She blamed it on the country, on his not having a father. He's a good boy, she thought. He is. They're all good. She was thinking of Reuben now, and Bowie. It's people that make them change.

She went over to the large wooden dresser, opened the top drawer and lifted out the black, leather-bound Bible. Next to the Bible lay a neat stack of letters from Travis. He was eight months gone, somewhere in Texas now, still searching. When would he come home? When would he give up the insane idea of seeking Bowie out to kill him? She'd asked him about it in her letters, but he'd always evaded her in answering. Wearily she closed the drawer.

"You're so set on church tonight," she said to Mica, "we'll just have us a little Bible reading. Haven't done much of that lately. We'd better start catching up."

Her fingers trembled as she opened the mystic book. She riffled the pages of the Old Testament—Samuel, Job, Jonah—Jonah and the great fish; it was a story Mica had always liked. Suddenly a hollowing bone chill probed deep inside her chest. I am a woman of sin, she thought. How dare I read the Lord's word to an innocent boy?

Mica was waiting, turning aside from the fire to watch her. Quickly she looked back down at the book, unable to face those wide, expectant eyes. But for the crackling of the fire there was no sound in the low-ceilinged adobe house.

Finally the boy said, "Read me the story of the woman."

"What woman, Mica? Mary?"

"No, Mama, the one eaten by the dogs—the one called Jezebel."

"Jezebel!" Her voice faltered. "Not—not tonight," she said. "I'm very tired, Mica."

Slowly the boy stood up. He stood in front of her and gazed at her for a long moment. She trembled for what he would say. His eyes misted over. Small, tormented, the pain of growing strong upon him, he reached out for her.

She took him, fiercely, with a grievous cry.



GRASS, stock, a woman? Is there anything else men like these will fight for? Bowie leaned against the corral fence and stared vacantly at the three dusty riders. Something you can eat or touch, he thought. Or piss on like a dog. It always has to be, for them.

"It took you a long time deciding," he said.

"We decided," the slim one, Ed Mich, said, rocking forward tensely in his saddle. Bowie knew him vaguely as he knew the other two, Emmett Graham and Karo Tote, all small ranchers farming and running cattle in this end of the San Pedro Valley. Tote was a relative newcomer to the valley; Graham he hadn't seen since that day on Pick-'em-up Grade when he'd selected him to act as his witness.

"Why me?" Bowie said easily. He was wondering idly what Emmett Graham was doing here. It didn't figure. Maybe, he chided himself, I'm getting to be a bad poker player.

"You've been missing stock like the rest of us, haven't you?" Ed Mich prodded him.

Emmett Graham sat very still on his horse. He was licking his thin dry lips.

"You reckon Travis would have gone with you?" Bowie said.

"Travis ain't here," Ed Mich said, determinedly.

"No," the third rancher, a short burly man with beetling black brows, said, "Travis wouldn'ta gone. He didn't believe in it." Karo Tote stopped. "But you're a different kind than he is." His two companions looked at Tote uneasily.

"Talk some more," Bowie said.

"Truth is, we need you. Bad."

"Never noticed any of you fellows dropping by here before. Pass the time of day. Cup of coffee."

"You don't need me to tell you folks in this valley don't approve of you."

"But you need me now. And you're willing to use me."

"Truth is," Karo Tote said, "you need us too."

"Don't hobble your lip now."

"Maybe you ain't lost as much cattle as the rest of us," Tote emphasized each word, but there's them peaches."

"What about them?"

"You don't help us clean these *hombres* out, you ain't going to have no peaches. They'll see to that."

"That's right," Ed Mich said.

Very deliberately Bowie rolled a cigarette.

"You been working pretty hard on them peaches," Karo Tote went on. "Worst thing about them, they border right on the creek. Keeps a man's cattle away from part of that water."

"That land's patented."

"Don't matter to some men. Reckon I don't have to tell you that."

"How you figure they'd get rid of those peaches?" Bowie inquired slowly.

"Well, if it was me—" Tote raised his black brows for emphasis—"I'd stampede 'em. Cut your fence or don't cut it. It don't matter. Run a herd of cattle through there. Them trees ain't big enough yet to handle that. Do it at night. I'd say my herd was spooked by a coyote. Couldn't

hold 'em. Terrible accident. Well? Ain't that the way you figure it?"

Bowie was silent. His gaze flickered briefly on each man. He drew deeply on the cigarette. "Tell me how it is," he said.

Ed Mich and Emmett Graham looked at Karo Tote and for the first time the tightness of their mouths broke.

"Ed, here," Tote said, "was hunting some of his calves back there in them hills. In the badlands, in a draw, he ran across this herd of cattle."

"About a thousand head," Ed Mich said. "Mixed brands. I seen that."

"They looked like they were just about ready to move out," Tote said. "New Mexico, Colorado, maybe even Kansas."

"How many men?"

"Seven. Got shot at too, didn't you, Ed?"

"Yes, sir. Before I made tracks out of there. I didn't want to leave my bones behind like all them others."

"Maybe they're gone now."

"Don't think so," Tote said. "They was still branding calves."

"So?"

"Ed used to prospect that country. He knows it backward. We can send a group of men in behind them above that draw. Stampede that herd. Only one way it can go. Down that draw and out of those hills. The draw narrows when it leaves the hills. We have another bunch of men there to pick up the herd and any of the rustlers still with them."

"How many men we have?" Bowie said.

"Twenty."

"Twenty against seven."

"Ten at the upper end of the draw," Tote said, "ten at the lower."

"We divide that herd up among us according to our past losses," Ed Mich said.

"Cattle that belongs to other ranchers that aren't with us?"

"Too bad," Ed Mich said. "They wasn't willing to fight for theirs, they don't get this time. A thousand head won't near cover all our losses anyway."

"That the way it is?" Bowie asked Tote.

"That's the way it is."

"And the hide burners?"

"We shoot to kill. Any left over we lynch. We want 'em to know we mean business."

"Just seven of them," Bowie mused. "There's lots more back in those hills. They'll come after you. Sooner or later. Twenty of you aren't many."

"They won't come after us while their leaders are gone," Ed Mich said.

"The whole Clanton tribe left for Mexico last night," Tote explained. "Some say they're bringing back a herd of horses, others a load of silver. Don't matter. They'll be gone for a few days, give us the time we need. We pull this off, every rancher in the valley will be with us next time. They won't have a chance against us. Anyhow we got to do it. They're bleeding us to death as it is."

"Any of your boys ever shot at anything other than squirrels or rabbits?"

"We can all handle a rifle," Ed Mich said.

Bowie smiled. He couldn't help it. "Any of your ranchers ever been shot at?"

"What are you driving at?" Ed Mich said.

"Any of you ever shot at a man before?"

"Some of us have," Karo Tote said. "We don't make a practice of it." He paused, raising his crow-black brows. "They was Indians in this valley once," he added.

Bowie sized this short, thick-set man with the startling

black brows. There'd be one, anyway, he thought. "Indians are different," he said, still not satisfied.

"Maybe they is, maybe they ain't. Red or white, it's always seemed to me shooting at a man's one and the same thing. Ain't it?"

"All right," Bowie said, "all right, man. Stop digging at me."

"You afraid?" Emmett Graham said unexpectedly. They were the first words the little man had spoken since he'd arrived. His eyes were bright, bead-bright. "You afraid?" he persisted, his voice too loud, unsteady.

"Me?" Bowie asked, locking the little man's eyes. They were beginning to waver, they wouldn't be able to hold his own much longer. Even now he was licking his lips again. Abruptly, then, Bowie let him off. He turned back to Karo Tote.

"All right," Bowie said curtly, "when do we leave?"

"This evening," Karo Tote said just as curtly. "We leave at dark and ride all night. At dawn we spook 'em."

Bowie shrugged. "Why not?" He looked briefly at Emmett Graham and added, "Emmett Graham," just soft enough so no one could hear, "Emmett Graham, this time I'm with you."

High up in the rocks in the lookout post at the mouth of the draw, the shivering breeze whipped Bowie's face raw and made his nose drip. Here, where the draw debouched from the hills, he stomped his feet and waited, pulling the collar of his leather jacket as far up on his neck as he could. It had been a clear night, frosty with stars and half a moon. Behind him across the sloping grasslands dawn was only an hour away. Below him concealed in the spill of rocks were four men on his side of the draw and on the other side, thirty yards away, Ed Mich and four more ranchers.

From his elevation he could see their shadows huddled behind the moonlight-lined boulders. He could guess how spooky they were feeling. It's never easy getting ready to kill a man, no matter how immense the wrong he's done you, Bowie thought, suddenly imaging his own father.

He focused his old field glasses far up the sandy draw. All he could see were rocks and sand hummocks and obscure dark shadows. Three miles up, maybe five, Karo Tote, Emmett Graham and eight others waited for the sun. Bowie wondered if they'd hear the shots down here when the stampede started. Maybe not. But they'd hear the herd soon enough. In an hour that silent gully would be thunderous and dusty with running, bawling cattle. He hoped these men below him wouldn't panic in that sudden burst of pounding hooves when the herd first pushed into sight. He'd told Ed Mich to have his men aim their fire up the draw, just as he'd told the men on this side. He didn't want them firing across the draw at one another. He had no confidence his instructions would be obeyed. He was glad he would be high above this battle.

He shivered and wiped his nose and waited for the sun. It took its time. When it came it was a blinding, oversized red ball tilting awkwardly above the horizon. It lifted the white mist over Barbacomori Creek. It silvered the dew on the great bowl of the grasslands running down to the river. It struck the night shadows away from the upper reaches of the sandy draw.

Bowie listened intently. Far off he thought he heard a small puff of sound. His ears could play him tricks here in the irregular formation of these rocks. Across the gully Ed Mich was watching him closely. Forty feet below, the eyes of his own men were glued to him for a signal. He wasn't sure. He fixed his glasses as far up the hills as

he could see. He waited, faintly feeling the sun's warmth on the back of his neck.

He saw the screen of dust preceding them long before he saw or heard them. Goose pimples squirted along his back. In a bend high up in the ravine a tumbleweed of dust was moving very fast.

He hand-signaled Mich and his own men below him. Immediately there was a blur of movement and a snicking of bolts as men shifted nervously into position, rifles cradled forward.

Now the herd poked through the dust. They were running hard, almost filling up the draw from one side to the other. Karo Tote and his crew had done a good job. Out in front of the herd were two strange riders whipping their mounts mercilessly to stay ahead of that stampeding mass. A misstep now by one of those horses meant sure death.

Bowie watched the two figures grow larger in his glasses. They might as well stumble. They would soon be sitting ducks, anyway.

Who were they? he wondered dully. What had impelled them to swing a wide loop? Had they ever wanted a small spread of their own once, only to see all the old grazing land being fenced off, homesteaded off, railroads and settlers poking their way onto the great free lands of their youth? Had they rebelled, taken the easy way out? A rope, a running iron, a calf that didn't suck the right cow? Bowie put down his glasses and his dark night thoughts. He picked up his rifle. It would be only a minute or two before the first two riders would be on them. Suddenly he laid down his rifle. Those two men, whoever they were, were already dead. He had no stomach for this business. It was the ranchers' battle. He was an intruder in this valley.

Down below they were firing as rapidly as they could. He cupped his hands over his mouth. "Too far!" he shouted. "Too far!" It didn't matter. Their shots couldn't stop the two riders now, nor the herd. They had to keep coming—straight into that crossfire.

One of the horses staggered. They were throwing their shots into the horses! The biggest target they could find! "Not the horses!" he screamed down at them. "You can't miss the riders from here!" His voice was lost in the rumble of hooves. He grabbed his rifle to sight down on the other rider. It was too late. Both horses and riders had gone down. He turned away, unable to watch the red, steaming, cloven-hoofed stream of beef pound over them. "You bastards!" he moaned. "You miserable Indian-killing bastards! Those horses never hurt anybody."

Dust rose up gritty and hot through the narrow mouth of the draw. It was getting difficult to see and breathe as the herd clotted the opening, stumbling out into the wide grassland.

They poured through slowly, a great red bawling tide cresting the dust waves they bore with them. Three more riders were trying to wedge their way to safety at the rear of the jammed, milling cattle. A fusillade of shots hummed about them, ricocheting crazily off the rocks. The blood-maddened ranchers cut down a swath of beef around them. Bullets hammered into horses and men. Two more horses went down before Bowie cleared the last horse of its rider.

The drag end of the herd was passing out of the draw now, leaving the dust swirling over the broken bodies in the sun. A single rider came roaring down the sandy wash into the tail of the herd, slamming lead in every direction. He looked familiar. "Hold your fire!" Bowie yelled. "Hold it!" In the rocks below no one listened any longer. They



cut the rider to ribbons. Bowie clambered down the rocks as quickly as he could.

"Hold it, you bastards!" he shouted. "I think that's one of ours. Mich!" he bellowed across the draw, "hold your fire, damnit! You hear me?"

"I hear you!" Mich hollered back belligerently.

"Get out after that herd now like you're supposed to!"

Slowly, reluctantly, Mich's men left the battlefield for their horses and the dirty job of turning the spooky herd and holding it.

The dust crept sluggishly out of the draw, revealing in stark outline on the white sand the small twisted clumps of dead men, dead horses and dead cattle. A single riderless horse, and one man struggling feebly, pinned under his slain horse, were the only signs of life left in the bloody draw. Bowie and his men waited while the buzzards wheeled in the sky and lit on the high rocks above the carnage.

Shortly, Karo Tote and his men pulled into the sandy wash. Bowie stepped out to meet them. Tote halted and scanned the buzzard-girdled arena. He dismounted and went to one of the fallen riders. It was the last one, the one who'd come gunning so madly through the sandy wash into the rear of the herd. He turned him over. It was Emmett Graham.

"They killed him," Bowie said. "Mistake. He was too close. The men thought he was one of the others."

Tote shook his head. "He just went crazy," he said. "When the shooting and stampede started. Completely crazy."

"So did they," Bowie said bitterly.

Tote took off his hat. He stood silently over the fallen man. "Damn," he said finally. "Damnit to hell! He wasn't even going with us. Had no heart for it till he heard we

was going to ask you. He ain't been himself since. What was there between you and this man?"

Bowie looked down at that small gray face from which all life had fled. Here was no white mule. He didn't answer Tote. It would have been useless anyway.

Emmett Graham's chest and belly had been ripped wide-open by that murderous crossfire. He lay there lumpy, dirty, like a busted sack of meal, this timid little man who had fooled him a long time ago by drawing twice on him. He'd always wondered why he'd done that. He would have bet a month's wages against his taking the bit that second time. Bowie stared wonderingly at the red gaping chest. Had he judged this man too quickly? Had he always judged men too quickly? No! Some men you just never knew.

Tote clamped his hat back on his head. "Any other casualties?" he said now.

"None that I know of," Bowie said.

"We got the other two up there." Tote sounded tired.

"It was a real butchering," Bowie said.

"How about him?" one of Tote's men said now, pointing to the man pinned in the sand under his horse.

"They's a big cottonwood not far from here," said another rancher.

"String him up!" shouted another.

"He's almost dead now," Bowie said. "Put a bullet in him quick, man! Don't let this mob get him!"

"Let's hang him, Karo."

"Hang him!"

They were all shouting it now.

The short, stolid man with the black brows studied Bowie closely. "Why not?" Karo Tote said. "It'll be a good warning to everyone else. One way or another he's going to die anyhow."

A dozen rough hands pulled the gasping, pain-gibbering

man out from under his horse. Quickly they hoisted him up on another mount and rode for the first cottonwood they could find.

A rope was hastily slung over a limb, the noose dropped over his neck. The man's eyes were swollen with the hurt from his shattered leg and crushed side, his forehead streamed with sweat. He was trying to say something as the horse was spanked out from under him. He hung there jerking, kicking grotesquely with one good leg and one smashed. He gagged, his eyes swiveling upward.

The ranchers laughed and shouted obscenities. One pulled out his pistol and bucked two shots into the swinging body. Others did the same.

Bowie struck a man off his horse. "He's dead! goddamn you! He's dead! Leave him alone now!"

"Who you to tell me?" the man said, struggling to his feet, but held back now by many hands. "He's a fine one to tell me! Him! We all know him. What he is!"

Karo Tote intervened quickly. "You done a good job for us back there, Bowie. Don't ruin it now."

"That murdering, blood-crazy swine! The man's dead. Leave him in peace now."

"Ain't no need to be so outspoken. Maybe I feel the same way you do, but it won't get these men under control telling 'em so."

"I'm no mush-mouth, mister! I never could learn! I never want to learn!"

"They're just taking off a little steam. Remember these men have been victims for many months now. This is the first time any of them have had a chance to strike back."

The men were quieting down now. The madness in their blood was draining away. They were remembering who they were, who they had always been. They looked down or straight ahead, no one wishing to glance at the man alongside him.

"Well," Tote said quietly, "reckon we'd better help round up that herd, men, and divide it now, hadn't we?"

"You take my share," Bowie said, "and divide it up among your fine citizens. I want no part of it. I can get along without it, understand? All I want is that one horse back there in the draw I saved from your trigger-happy heroes." He looked savagely at the dead man still swinging slowly at the end of the rope from the impact of the bullets thrown into him. "And to get out of here as fast as I can!" He turned, sweeping up each man in the group with his hot glance.

"I know what you think of me," Bowie addressed them. "What you say about me behind my back. But when I kill I have my reasons, just as I thought you had yours today. One difference: maybe I haven't had as much church-going as some of you, but when I kill I buzzard no man!"

He stopped to catch his breath. Suddenly he remembered a boy severing an Indian's head and boiling it for a Sam Houston souvenir. It was too long ago, Bowie thought. I didn't know any better then. These are grown men. He glared at the men shuffling their feet in the dirt, hand-jumpy on the saddle horns. He'd made an excuse for himself; could he make one for them?

Bowie wheeled his horse. Anger froze in the steel-stiff arch of his back. Anger at himself now. He could no longer make an excuse for anyone.

"Bowie," Karo Tote called. "Thanks for coming—anyway."

"Ask me again, sometime."

"Maybe I will. You ever need a favor—call on me."

"That'll be the day. Oh, Christ! That'll be the day!"

GIB RAY'S SALOON was not crowded. A few red-knuckled men still remained from the late afternoon shift at the stamp mill; four Mexican cowhands smoking dark twisted cheroots were silently bucking the tiger at the faro table in the back; and a half-dozen ranchers and townsmen lined the long shiny wooden bar drinking their beer and whiskey, talking loudly of beef and grass and grain, and more softly of stolen cattle and the men who stole them.

Bowie struck his spurred boot up on the brass rail and leaned an elbow on the bar. Bleakly he regarded his half-empty whiskey glass. It had been another hard day. Rounding up the spring calves, branding them, cutting them. His nose and throat were seared with dust and scorched cowhide. It gave a man a mighty need for drink. Still, he should have left Charleston a long time ago, he was thinking now. He didn't need this much. His craggy, welted face moved in a frown. Liar, he told himself. He was building a prison, isolating a part of himself. To do this a man needed a little help.

Quickly Bowie drank off the whiskey in his glass. "Again," he said to the white-aproned bartender.

In the mirror, above the two whiskey kegs and bright gleaming bottles filling the back bar, Bowie saw Karo Tote enter the saloon. The short burly rancher with the thick

black patches above his eyes nodded to several of the ranchers and moved up to the bar. He planted himself near Bowie.

"Whiskey," Tote ordered. The bartender set a bottle and a glass in front of him. Methodically Tote poured himself a glassful and drank it off short and neat. He leaned his back against the bar tilting the toe of one boot upward off the packed earthen floor.

"Clantons are back," he said to no one in particular. "Got back last night."

Bowie ignored him. He hadn't seen Tote for almost a week, since that bloody day they'd brought the stolen herd out of the hills.

"Just seen Billy Clanton ride into town," Tote said. "Looks like he's been drinking."

"So?" Bowie said finally, not looking up.

"So I thought you'd like to know. Probably be coming in here."

"What's it to me?"

"I've got forty-two head I'm still holding for you, Bowie. Your share of the herd."

"You heard what I said about that."

"I reckon I don't hear very well."

"Then listen now!" He turned on the shorter man. "Once and for all, I want none of those cattle. None! You hear me?"

Karo Tote shrugged and moved away from the bar. He sauntered back to the faro table in the rear of the saloon as Billy Clanton barged through the swinging doors.

Young Billy was all duded up, black striped pants, freshly greased boots, clean white shirt, tall white Stetson. He elbowed his way to a spot at the bar and waited for the bartender to pour him a drink.

"Poor crowd tonight," Billy said loudly and bluntly to

the barkeep. The barkeep's round face was a silent, smiling mask.

"Heard they was a little shooting up in the hills last week," Billy went on.

"Heard about that," grunted the bartender.

"Them fellows killed must have lots of friends. I'd hate to be one of them that did the killing."

"Billy!" Karo Tote's voice crackled through the smoke and tobacco reek of the room. "Before we had twenty guns. Now we got a hundred and fifty. You tell your Paw and brothers and those friends of yours that. Any violence on their part, any more stolen cattle, we're going to wipe them out."

"By God! that's right!" one of the ranchers at the bar spoke up. "We're all behind Tote now. Ever' one of us. Any more killing, we're going to string up ever' one of you Clantons. By God! You're first!"

"Talk mighty big, all of you," young Billy said. "Well, we'll see." His eyes scanned the men in the saloon. He saw Bowie's head towering above the rest. His reddened eyes narrowed. Cockily he strutted down the bar to him.

"You," he said. "You, Malabar. How many guns you got backing you up? You and your peaches?"

Bowie took his elbows off the bar. He stood very straight over the pimply, narrow-faced youth. "Two," he said coldly.

Billy Clanton grinned. The breath of liquor was strong on him. He'd been drinking long before he came in here. "That ain't enough. I seen that horse that Wade boy is riding now. That horse belonged to one of my best friends. I ain't forgetting."

"I ever hear you been over to the Wade place again, I personally guarantee to kill you."

Billy Clanton laughed gratingly. "You're a one to talk.

What you been doing with your brother's woman all this time he's gone? Just because she's a bitch in heat—"

Bowie's hand leaped for his gun. Billy Clanton's drunken face contorted in surprise, then dismay. He went for his own gun, too late. Bowie took one giant stride and laid the barrel viciously along the side of his head. Billy Clanton crumpled like an axed steer. Bowie trembled over him.

Tote was at his side. How he got there so fast Bowie never knew. "You had every right to kill him, Bowie," Tote said, "the dirty-mouthed, surly little pup."

"He isn't worth killing," Bowie said, controlling his voice.

The bartender unceremoniously dumped a pitcher of cold water in young Clanton's face. Groaning, his eyes squinched tight in pain, young Clanton struggled slowly back to consciousness. Rough hands jerked him to his feet. Holding his head in both hands, he blinked unsteadily at Bowie.

"Them peaches," he muttered. "Take a good look at them. You ain't going to have them long."

"You try it," Bowie said, "you won't have just a lump on your head the next time."

"I'll be there."

"I'll be waiting."

Billy Clanton reeled woozily out of the saloon.

"He means it," Tote said. "You hurt him here today. Inside, I mean. He's got no excuses. You both were wearing guns. Not like when your brother hit him, unarmed. He's been carrying a grudge against Travis ever since. Now he'll have twice as much reason to hate you Malabars. Ain't nothing like a young punk who's had his ass paddled in front of his home crowd. Especially a Clanton. You mind what I told you about them peaches, Bowie."

"I'll remember, Tote."

"You need any help—"



All expression drained from Bowie's face.

"I know," Tote said. "That'll be the day. Still—"

"Why?" Bowie cut him short. "No one else wants to. Why you willing to help me?"

Tote arched a single black brow. "Say I haven't made up my mind about you. Say I make up my mind slow. Say you did me a favor, and I owe you one. Say none of us is perfect and able to judge another or—" he lowered the arched brow—"say I just like peaches." Tote nodded coolly. "Evenin', Malabar."



WRAPPED IN HIS SUGANS, the last of the fire flickering over him, Travis lay on the spongy, spring-turning earth, gazing up at the big, star-crusted Texas sky. Sleep would not come easy. He picked out the Big Dipper, Orion, Cassiopeia. On the other side of the fire, his back against his saddle, the little pock-faced killer, A.J. Dunit, sat cross-legged, laboriously reading Travis' old, frayed Bible. A small lump of darkness moved uncertainly in the middle of Travis' stomach. He concentrated on the sky.

Little Dipper, Draco . . . It had been twelve years since Travis had seen this sky. Twelve years since he and his father and mother had left Texas for Tucson.

Virgo, Leo, Cepheus . . . Bowie had taught him this sky. As young boys lying out late at night Bowie had traced their familiar patterns in the heavens and spoken his dreams. Bowie was only ten but he would fight in the War of Rebellion and kill every damn Yankee in the Union Army. He would kill every Indian on the Plains. He would be as brave as any man at the Alamo, as any of Fisher's men selecting their black or white beans at Mier. He would ride up the trail from San Antonio clear to the Yellowstone. He would shoot faster and straighter than any man who ever lived and no one would ever strike him or Travis or speak badly to them again. And, lastly, he would

see to it that they would never die. They would just live forever and then turn into old white mules.

Gemini, Hydra, Lynx . . . Sleep just wouldn't come. A.J. was still reading, poking a forefinger slowly over each word in the black book. His cratered face was a web of dipping, sliding shadows as the flames from the fire played upon it. What was he reading? What had captured his strange fancy in that book now?

For over eight months he'd been sharing sugans with this little nameless killer. It hardly seemed possible. From the high, mountainy, sheep-stunk air of Wyoming, across the yellow, shriveling, dusty plains of Kansas, through the red mud and Osage orange of the Nations, down here finally to the rolling, live-oak country of Texas where it had all begun.

From his mother's old soiled packet of letters from Bowie, he and A.J. had traced Bowie's cold trail. A.J., who seemed to have his own source of information, had agreed they'd take the last place Bowie had been seen, first, and work back. It was as good a way as any to track a man who seemed never to venture too far from the pattern of cattle and cowtowns etched in his letters. But now they were almost at the end of the trail. They'd covered most of Texas. All that was left was the wild *brasada* country. Then where? Bowie seemed to have disappeared. Not even the two big cattlemen, Forge and Corril, back in Cheyenne, with their vast network of bought law, had been able to find him.

If A.J. was disappointed he didn't show it. After all he was on expenses. He had nothing better to do. Hunting a man down was his life. But for Travis, he'd lost eight months. Not lost completely, he told himself. Some of the gaps in his brother's life had been filled in, gaps that Bowie had never bothered to talk about in his short, infrequent visits to his mother in Arizona. Like those two men he'd

braced in a gunfight. The little sad-faced, owl-eyed livery man in Baxter Springs filled in that gap. Yes, he'd remembered Bowie, the old man said when Travis and A.J. had ridden in there months ago. "Damn near everyone in this town does."

"It was fourteen years ago," the old man said. "Just a couple of years after the war. Them Texans was all trailing their herds near us on the way to the railheads. Contaminating our cows with their Spanish fever ticks, running over our grain, too. We set up a deadline, but they ignored it. We decided to show 'em we meant business. This Malabar herd, about two thousand head, was moving through. They was warned but still they came." The old manure-stained man blinked his huge watery eyes. "Well, a hundred or so of us slipped in on them at night. They was only ten of them. Was easy enough to disarm them and tie them up. We tied 'em naked to trees and run off the herds. Wouldn't a done no more wasn't for the abusive language of that boy, Bowie, and some of the worse element in our crowd who'd been drinking." The old man shook his head sadly.

"They was armed with hickory sticks, pitchforks, shovels. A few even had guns. When this boy started swearing they started hitting him and his Paw with those poles. Weltered 'em up right smart. Then they untied 'em and beat 'em down on the ground till they was bleeding real good. Two of our men, Ad Wolfscher and Leroy Hight, they hadn't enough. They was still fighting the War of Rebellion. They stood over this here Malabar and Bowie, both naked and bloody, and pissed on 'em. Yes, sir! and said, I remember it like it was yesterday, 'Tell your Texas friends about this.' They pissed all over 'em from head to foot. I saw this old Malabar holding his son down. The boy was screaming and crying while they were doing that to him. The old man was saying, 'Hold still, they'll kill you, you don't!'

"The boy was screaming, 'You sonofabitch! you sonofabitch! It's better to die than stand this!' but the old man wouldn't let him up. Ad and Leroy, all drunk up, was just laughing and peeing away. Finally they got tired of it, run out of water, cattle scattered off, one thing and another, and we all came back to town, no one feeling very good, I'll be honest with you." The old, sad-faced livery man's owlish eyes were watering again. He blinked them rapidly.

"Three months later this great arrowweed of a kid comes riding into town. That's right. He's looking for Ad Wolfscher and Leroy Hight. He finds 'em, first Ad, then Leroy. Face to face he outdraws 'em, shoots 'em both right in the belly. Some folks here they say he pissed on both of them too, before they died. It ain't true. I can vouch for that."

1868. Bowie had been sixteen then. That was why he had run away from home that year, for good. Travis knew Bowie would rather have died than let those men urinate on him. He and his father had survived but they'd acted ignobly, so unlike his precious heroes. How he must have hated his father for that shame.

It was a big gap in the record filled in at last.

On the other side of the fire A.J. Dunit's black, shoulder-length hair gleamed darkly in the whip flick of the flames. The little pock-faced man was chuckling softly. Travis pulled back from his star-riven, old thoughts. What had the little man found that was so funny in the Bible? What could *anyone* find that was funny in the Bible. He was astounding, this little figure with the absurd name he was so proud of, and the garland of ears, this legend in his own time. It never failed to amaze Travis the way grown men, yes, a whole town, would get the spooks when this little man walked through. It shouldn't surprise him now. He had

seen it often enough. Yet it always did. Surprised and awed him too, until he thought of Dodge City and the way A.J. had dispatched that glory seeker, Ben, there. He thought a lot of that; it was an evil dream and A.J. was the devil, himself, bending over to pluck an ear out of the earth. He would think of the girl Jeanine, too; with Turko's horrible mark on her face, who had given herself so violently to him there. And this would trigger off thoughts of other women he'd had since, women you'd never find at church socials. What was he trying to prove with them? Just because A.J. and others took them, why him? They invariably filled him with revulsion and disgust, until he forced himself to think of Zoanna, the reason for all of this, and was at last comforted.

He had found his mind turning too often to Zoanna these past few weeks. Zoanna and his peaches. These were his sole reasons for being. When he thought of them Bowie became as gray and unreal as a midnight shadow. Those peaches would be bearing their first fruit in a few weeks. He wanted to be there. Where he belonged. Working in the soil. Picking his own fruit. He was a sodbuster, not a gunfighter. Then, because he could never put it aside, he recalled the words of the people of his valley, the abuse, the blows they'd rained on him. His big wind-burned hands clenched and unclenched along his sides.

Across the fire A.J. laid the Bible down with a smile. "You know, Travis, this here David was right smart with his slingshot. Supposing he'd had a couple of guns like me, he'd really cut up that Goliath. Reckon?"

Travis didn't answer. What could he say to this diabolical little man? What was there left to say?

"In a way I'm like that there David, ain't I? And Bowie, he's like that Goliath. He's a giant in size, to begin with." He chuckled. "Reckon Bowie's Goliath? Travis—" the lit-

tle man was insistent—"you reckon I'm David and Bowie's Goliath?"

A long sigh escaped Travis. "I reckon every man has his own Goliath, A.J.," he said. Abruptly, Travis reared up, his own words reverberating in his head. And who is my Goliath? Who in God's name do I have to kill? Not Bowie, not him. That's not the answer.

Suddenly, for the first time in many months he was facing it squarely again—why he'd stayed with A.J. all this time, why he'd taken all those women, why he'd turned to drink like other men, why he was trying in every way to act like other men. A strange, mad exhilaration seized him.

He was seeing the Arizona earth, the peach trees, Zoanna. He was seeing the look in Mica's eyes, the people's eyes. That was his Goliath, this devil's pride that had set him up as judge and executioner of his own brother and sent him off on this lonely senseless trail with a vile nameless little monster from the very pits of hell.

He could go back and endure their scorn. He could! And if he wasn't strong enough he could pack up and leave. After the fruit was harvested he and Zoanna and Mica could leave that lawless country. They could come here to Texas and start over where there were courthouses, and right and wrong wasn't settled with a gun. Better that than any more killing because of shame and false pride.

He felt great soaring relief. He wanted to laugh out loud. "A.J.," he said, "I've got something to tell you. You listening?"

"I'm listening."

"I'm quitting, A.J.," he spoke rapidly. "In the morning I'm going home. Back to Arizona. I've stopped seeking Bowie, you hear me?"

"Kind of sudden, this, ain't it?" The little man's voice betrayed no concern.



"I just come to my senses, that's all. I've been acting like a madman all these months. You talking about David and Goliath made me see it. I'm through with Bowie now. Through, I tell you!"

"You're scared he'll kill you," A.J. said. "You're afraid."

"Yes, I'm that too."

"Yellow. Well, it don't fool me none."

"Call me any names you want, A.J. It doesn't matter."

"It takes guts to kill a man. Any man. Real guts. But when he killed your Paw—"

"You can't shame me into it, A.J. I'm through with it. All through."

"Supposing I say you ain't."

"You'll have to kill me, A.J."

The little man started to grin, then stopped. His eyes narrowed. His face twisted into a cratered, fire-shadowed mask.

"All right," he said softly, "maybe I will."

Early the next morning they rode stiffly and wordlessly into Potrero. It was a heat-numbed, dusty, little town with a new yellow depot, some empty holding pens, a general store, a blacksmith shop, and a dozen other false-front saloons and business houses.

A.J. immediately headed for the depot and telegraph office while Travis made for the store to replenish his provisions for the trip back to Arizona.

When he came out, A.J. was sitting his horse waiting for him. He eyed him silently as Travis tied his provisions on his pack horse and mounted up.

"You got over last night's foolishness?" A.J. said.

"Goodbye, A.J." Travis extended his hand.

The little, pock-faced man ignored it. His eyes glittered strangely. Travis wheeled and moved off down the nar-

row street, conscious of each beat of his heart against the cage of his chest, listening to each hoof bite mushily into the hot morning dirt.

He was almost at the end of the short street when A.J. drew alongside his stirrup and reached over, viciously reining Travis' horse down. A grin chipped the craters of that small face. "I'll be dipped, Travis," he said, "if you ain't got more gall than brains. You didn't think I believed that story you was giving me last night!"

"What story?"

"You knew where he was all the time. How long you think you could fool me? You knew I was bound to find out he was there sooner or later. You knew someone was bound to see him there." He shook his head.

"Who you talking about?"

"That girl of yours, she wrote you, in one of them letters."

"She wrote me what? Make sense, A.J."

"You can stop it now," A.J. said coldly. "I know he's in Arizona."

"Arizona?"

A.J. saw the shock on Travis' face. He smiled and reached into his shirt pocket for the telegram. He took his time, wagging his head. "I'll be surely dipped," he said admiringly. "From Forge and Corril in Cheyenne," he indicated the wire. "An old biscuit roller that used to chuck wagon for them just got back into Cheyenne from Tombstone. Says this here Bowie's there. Been there for months. Look here. Look at how long this telegram is. Must be fifty to a hundred words alone just giving me bloody hell for being so stupid." A.J. grinned. He began to count the words, then shrugged and folding the telegram, put it back in his pocket.

"If they want to waste money like that I reckon they

can afford it. Why should I worry? Come on, boy, let's get out of this here Texas." He spurred his horse into a lope. "Come on now, I said. We kept Bowie waiting long enough."



PART FOUR

**AND A MULE**



BOWIE strained his tired eyes against the dark, clouded sky. Soundlessly, now, he began to swear. It was less than two hours till dawn. Too long. He had that old helpless feeling of being put upon and having to strike back at anything, anyone. He was beaten now, whipped. He knew it. For three nights they'd been stampeding cattle at the fences that girdled the peach orchard. They had him now, any time they wanted him. They were playing with him, taunting him.

It was a sad, dirty, little joke. He barely knew his adversaries. They were gray shadows he glimpsed only once or twice among the cattle in the stampeding night. The Clanton tribe? Possibly. Billy Clanton? The young, insolent dude, barely out of his teens, hardly worthy of being a foe? Probably. But there were others out there too, lots of them, had to be, to manage those herds they'd thrown against the front and flanks of the orchard for three nights. Who were they? He didn't know. Men who wanted this grassland only for grazing, not for a sodbuster growing peaches, who, if successful, would bring other sodbusters onto the grassland. It had always been this way, since the beginning of time. Might makes right. He never dreamed he'd ever be fighting on the side of the soddies.

But a man ought to know whom he's fighting. Though it'd never been any different, he'd always had to fight

something. He'd never known what it was. Who it was. It was an old, old, story, the pattern of his life. He had forever been seeking his adversary, yet never finding him.

He kneeled and waited in the still warm ashes of his fence. A rifle lay across one knee, another on the ground at his side. Thirty feet ahead of him were more ashes, colder ashes, that had been the mesquite log firebreak he'd built along the north side and along both flanks as well.

Damn! His teeth grated. If it were only not spring and grass in the grazing lands here were not so green, he would have shown them a real fire in this valley.

Behind him, intact and unshielded, the young orchard stretched out two hundred yards to the creek which bounded it on the south. For three hours now, since he'd fired the fence, the orchard had been absolutely defenseless.

Everyone knew it now. It was a game of cat and mouse. Bowie's brooding wrath struck out bitterly at the six Mexican cowhands he'd brought here off the spring roundup to chop wood and brush. Even they had known. After he'd torched the coal-oil-soaked fence he'd ordered them to get their guns and man the three exposed sides of the orchard and shoot the cattle, piling them up as they came in so the others would veer off. They had looked at him silently. He knew what was going through their minds. There were six of them, plus the lame one, Compadre, Appolonio and Julio from the woman's ranch, and the *gringo* boss—ten men to cover three sides, the east and west each two hundred yards long, the north a hundred yards long. Four men on the east, four men on the west, two on the north, against herds of one to two thousand head pounding in from all three sides in the middle of the night! *Dios! Jesus y Maria!*

They had turned from him and made for their horses. Appolonio and Julio had sunk down heavily against the base of the cottonwood trunk, pretending not to hear or



understand. Compadre had watched him out of drooping, bloodshot eyes. He'd shrugged. "It is useless now, *señor*," he'd said.

He shouldn't blame them, Bowie knew. For several days now they'd all worked late into the night cutting brush and mesquite and stacking it in a huge strewn-out fire barrier around the orchard. Then they'd chopped more brush and mesquite and stored it. For the last three nights they'd defended the orchard by drenching the brush and mesquite barrier with coal oil and firing it to repulse the cattle stampeded at the young trees. There had been too many attacks. Three the first night, three the second, and already two this night. Finally, they'd run out of brush and mesquite. There wasn't enough brush and mesquite in the whole grass bowl to withstand that many assaults, and ten men couldn't possibly cut it fast enough anyway. The wooden fence had been the last to go. He shouldn't be angry at them. But whom could he strike back at? Whom could he get his hands into?

On his left now, he could hear faint bawling of cattle. It was an effort not to close his eyes, not to stretch out and lie waiting for them to roll over him. No matter which direction they came from, it was useless now. One man couldn't stop them. He lifted his head. He rubbed tobacco on his eyelids until his eyes burned and watered. He raised up on one knee and waited. He could hear them good now and he marveled that he could remain so rooted to the earth without running.

It was some relief to know the woman was back there in the safety of the creek and the overnight cabin. He'd allowed her to stay, making coffee and sandwiches for the men. It had been foolish but wonderful, her coming out here to help him. Yes, he was glad she'd come. He needed her, and he needed her two men. But the boy, he didn't need him. He was in the way; he could get hurt. She'd

said she didn't mean to bring him but if she'd left him home, he'd have come anyway. She couldn't hold him since Bowie had given him the new horse.

Well, he'd gotten the boy out of the way by sending him to town with the wagon to fetch coal oil—though they'd long ceased to need it.

The purr of rushing hooves moved along his boot leather.

"Malabar!"

He whirled toward the shout.

"Here!" he said.

A moment later a dark bundled figure carrying a rifle clumped down beside him in the ashes. Bowie stared close at quiet eyes under a thick-bush of black eyebrows.

"You," he said.

"A couple of dusty riders was drinking it up in town," Karo Tote said. "They said you just fired your fences, said you was all through. I ain't been able to sleep well these last few nights. Figured I'd come out and take a look."

Bowie faced ahead.

"You ain't going to stop anything here by yourself, Bowie. It's crazy."

"I don't need you to tell me that. Go on back to the cabin and get some coffee for yourself," he said less gruffly, "and wait." The sound of running cattle was quickening. "Now git!"

"I'm tired," Tote said. "Tired of walking. Reckon I'll just set a spell." He cocked his rifle.

Bowie looked silently at Karo Tote. The throbbing earth tingled the arches of his feet. All of his past cried out to him, warning him. You're like two dogs, hackles raised, nose pressed to asshole, stalking each other in the dust. That's what a man did to another man. "Why?" he said. "Why you? This isn't your affair."

"Way I figure it," Tote began evenly, "only way we can live in this valley is to have peace and order. Takes the law for that. A strong law we ain't had. We don't stick together the law will always go to the highest bidder. One day we'll have the law straightened out here, I figure. Hear 'em on our left?" Karo Tote said, questioningly.

For one brief instant Bowie wished he could reach out and clasp the older man's hand.

He pointed with his rifle straight ahead. "I was out there trying to knock these trees down, I'd send my biggest herd in on the shortest width. That's here, where we are."

"I don't see or hear anything in front of us. But I do hear them out there," Tote nodded to his left.

"It's a feint, I believe," Bowie said. "I'd do that too. Run a few head in from the left and then the right to draw off our strength, and then hit us with the big herd from the front. That's what I'd do. Still, they don't have to. They can do it any way they want. They're just playing with me now. But they'll play safe."

"Take a good share of all the cattle in this valley for an operation like this."

"I figure they got them. Probably some of my own cattle out there too, getting set to run down my own peaches." *I mean my brother's peaches*, he mumbled under his breath. *My brother's cattle. My brother's woman.*

"Someone's sure running a lot of beef and money off a good bunch of cows," Tote said. "Look!"

A piece of the moon gashed a rent in the clouds and on their left they could see now a dark crest of hard-humping cattle break over the earth and enter the west side of the orchard.

"How many, you reckon?" Tote asked.

"A hundred. Two hundred. Not many." They could hear them thrashing through the trees.

On their right now another small herd was forming,

bawling, rolling on, stomping into the deeper darkness of the young trees. There in the heart of the orchard the two herds were milling now, bawling frantically.

Bowie laid his head against the earth. "They're coming," he said.

"All right," Karo Tote said matter-of-factly. "It's impossible, Bowie," he added. "You know that."

"Get back to the cabin. I don't need you." Bowie tried to insult him. "Your kind. Git out of here now!"

"Always wanted to fight a windmill just once in my life." Tote looked at him oddly. "How does it feel, Bowie?"

The ground was shivering under them. Four thousand, eight thousand hooves, maybe, were rattling over the earth straight toward them. Their bawling was a growing thunder. Bowie licked his lips.

"Stack 'em up," Bowie said. "Make 'em pile up and angle off around the fallen ones. That's our only chance."

"All right, General." He thought Tote smiled.

They pounded in, fifty deep, on a front wide enough to sweep the orchard. The nicks and clicks of horns clashing in that packed stampede was clearly audible now above the clattering hooves. A long roll of dust moved in front of them, lifted, and swirled over their broad sweating dun-colored backs. They could see the dark loom of them now, a hundred yards ahead, racing under the gray, shrouded skies. They had been brought in fast and tight and were now running loose straight ahead at them, their gray mottled curving horns reflecting faintly the scrap of moon that pierced the murkiness of the night. Their body heat bruised forward ahead of them like a sudden hot summer wind. It engulfed Bowie and Karo Tote, streaking their faces and foreheads with huge droplets of sweat.

"Fire!" Bowie said. One knee on the ground he triggered off a half dozen shots as fast as he could into the surging,

wild-eyed line of cattle. He saw horns drop away, others swarm right over them, hardly swerving at all. They were less than fifty yards away now.

"Stack them up!" he screamed above the din and rancid hide smell. "Stack them up right ahead of us! It's our only chance!"

Feeling the sweat move on his hands, he laid the rifle against the dark shadowy figures. He stopped three abreast fifteen feet in front of him. He knocked over the three behind them, felling them almost on top of the first three. There was no time left. They were being drowned in an ocean of beef. He grabbed the short, bulky Tote. He pushed him and dived directly ahead for the cattle he'd dropped. He slammed Tote roughly against the belly bulwark of the dead cattle and then snuggled tight against him as the cattle leaped them and swung around them.

He lay there gasping, unable to breathe in the heavy, heat-drenched stench of the passing bodies. He heard them crashing terror-stricken down the length of the orchard. He heard the trees snap and break.

Bowie's fingers reached up to touch his forehead. His hand came away wet and sticky with blood from the dead beast. He smelled of it. He swallowed huge gulps of air, letting his eyes grow accustomed again to the shapes and shadows of this clouded night.

Heavily, Tote rolled out from under the belly of the dead cow. "They're gone." His voice was a thin, strained whisper. "It's all over! You hurt?" He sounded as if he couldn't believe he was still alive. With difficulty he helped Bowie up into a sitting position.

Numbly Bowie wiped his forehead with his bandanna. He wiped his hands. Each finger. Between each finger. At last he forced himself to turn around. To look at what had once been a peach orchard. The earth was trampled and

shattered. The young trees, only a few short months away from bearing, were bent and broken, smashed to the ground by the crush and storm of jammed, rampaging cattle. A single, solitary tree stood out amid the wreckage, an isolated shadow in the vaster darkness of the night.

Bowie laughed, a painful, wracking cry wrenched up from the bottom of his belly. "At least the old man doesn't have to see this."

"You hurt, Bowie? Bowie, what is it?"

"Nothing, Tote," he said. "Nothing you'd ever understand."

Slowly then they rose and started the walk back to the creek and the cabin. Mutely they picked their way over the trampled earth and through the uprooted trees.

Bowie paused at the single small tree, aslant but still standing. He surveyed it silently.

"Thirty rifles," Tote brooded. "Just thirty more, I believe we could have saved them."

Bowie's jaw worked. He kicked viciously at the canted tree. He pushed on it as hard as he could, driving all his weight against it. The cords of his neck tautened, his face purpled with strain. Showers of the tiny pink blossoms cascaded down on him.

"Damn you!" he said. "Goddamn you!" He backed off and hit the tree with all the power of his lunging side. Groaning against the earth, the tree began to teeter. Slowly it floundered to the ground.

"Easy son, easy," Tote said, laying his hand on Bowie's trembling shoulder.

Bowie swept the hand away. "Leave me alone! Damn you, leave me alone! I thank you for coming. I thank you for what you did. But leave me alone."

Bowie felt his insides going. He turned toward the cabin and the woman Zoanna. He began to run. Through the or-

chard, through the tangle of fallen trunks and limbs he ran toward that cabin. He ran as fast as he could.

At the end of the orchard under the big cottonwood by the creek they were waiting for him, Zoanna and the boy Mica, holding a lantern between them, and behind them in the shadows, Compadre, Appolonio and Julio. The three Mexicans examined him darkly and inscrutably. Zoanna's eyes were red and swollen. She wavered unsteadily.

"You all right?" he said, catching his breath.

"Yes," she whispered. "We were all in the cabin. You?"

He nodded.

Mica pulled away from his mother and tugged at Bowie's hand. "Bowie! Bowie!" The boy could hardly constrain himself.

"Mica!" Zoanna warned.

"Travis's back," the boy blurted.

He looked down at the boy's face, eyes shiny with the excitement of the night. "What you say, boy?"

"Travis' back!"

"Travis?" He spoke dumbly.

"I seen him in town. When I went after the coal oil."

"Travis!" He smiled, his first reaction to his brother's return one of real pleasure. He looked at Zoanna and saw the pain etched into the tightness of her mouth. The smile that softened the craggy welts of his face vanished quickly. He felt an icy wind stir inside his head. Travis back? At a time like this? On top of everything else this night, Travis was back?

The boy was still tugging at him. "When I got the coal oil at the store," the boy was saying, "Mr. Nielsen told me he had just ridden in and he was in Gib Ray's saloon. Almost the whole town was up like it was daytime. Know why, Bowie? Travis had a man with him. Know who he was?"

Bowie locked Zoanna's eyes. "I love you." He formed it soundlessly with his lips. What would she be thinking now? Feeling?

The boy pulled at him. "Know who he was, Bowie?"

"Who, Mica?" His eyes didn't leave the woman's face. It was white, drained of all blood.

"A.J. Dunit!"

The name unlimbered his knees. It cleansed him of all the fatigue and dazing numbness of this night. He grasped the boy's shoulders.

"You sure, boy?"

"Sure. I went to the saloon myself." Mica glanced hastily at his mother. "Just to see Travis, and tell him about the stampedes on the peaches. Travis wanted to come out here right away but the other man, A.J. Dunit—" he spoke the name almost reverently—"he said no, they wasn't coming out here till daylight."

A.J. Dunit, Bowie marveled. So it was to be the little man with the charm necklace of ears. Suddenly it was all very clear. He had often wondered why it had taken those two cattlemen in Cheyenne, Forge and Corril, so long to seek him out for revenge. Now the wondering was over. Somewhere, somehow, A.J. Dunit had run into Travis. Obviously they had both been seeking him together ever since. That could be the only reason it had taken A.J. so long to find him.

He began to laugh now. "Good!" he shouted. "Good!"

The Mexicans moved off softly into the shadows of the creek.

He wheeled and stared down the desolate, twisted, broken, fallen rows of trees.

"Good!" he shouted exultantly.

He couldn't strike back at the whole valley. Or all the other valleys, places, people, things, that had always lain writhing and gnawing inside him. But he could strike back



at this little man come to kill him. He wasn't a faceless shadow, an ought, a should, an idea you spent your life trying to live up to, fated always to fail. He was mere flesh and blood—breakable flesh, flowable blood.

He swung a giant's fist at the dark clouded roof of the sky. "Good!" he screamed. "Good! Goddamn you!"



THE BOY'S BACK was small and straight, as he strutted bandy-legged like an old cowhand out through the swinging doors of the saloon. Reluctantly Travis sat down again at the crowded table. He hated to see the boy go. His was the only friendly face in this saloon, in this town. His eyes had been so bright and excited talking about the peaches, the gun Bowie had given him, the horse Bowie had given him, all those things a young boy could really get excited about. A pang of jealousy drew Travis' mouth tight and furrowed his forehead. Bowie had made a real convert. It was obvious the boy idolized him. It was more than Travis had ever accomplished. A deep longing for the boy moved him. He had almost forgotten how much he could be moved.

Travis drained off his glass. A strange cowhand refilled it with whiskey. Everything was the same here. Bottles glittered on the back bar; the mirror he had broken in that fight eight months ago was now repaired and looked like new; Gib Ray's big belly hung over the same white apron; the earthen floor, scratched by countless boot heels, lay stained forever with tobacco juice. The drumbeat of the stamp mill chunked solidly away by the river. Miners drifted in off the night shift; others drifted out to man the twenty-four-hour-a-day mill. Nothing had changed. Not even the contempt with which the people regarded him.

The only greeting they'd given him had been a curt nod. Except for one man, whom he hardly knew, who'd expressed it for all of them. "So you finally decided to come back?" he'd said, and turned away. *Welcome, home.*

The little pock-faced man was smiling oddly at him across the table. He was surrounded by admirers, old friends who had found sanctuary in this lawless section of the territory. They were greeting each other, shooting loud questions back and forth, recounting the old days. They moved in and out and around the table like moths seeking the light. There was no doubt the turnout pleased A.J. immensely. But now, for a moment, the little man neglected them.

"Nice boy, that," A.J. said to Travis through the talk and clink of glasses. "Your woman's boy?"

He had a final need to hurt this little man. "You scared of the dark, A.J.?" he said sharply and loudly, stopping the conversation around the table. "You afraid it'll be even in the dark? That why you don't want to go out there now?"

A.J. studied him carefully. "I want no accidents," he said mildly.

"You want the sun behind you?"

"Hell, yes! He wants the sun behind him," one of the men said. "In the dark a man can get shot." He whinnied like a horse.

"Dark or light," A.J. said, his voice hardening, "A.J. Dunit can take care of himself."

"That's a blue-tailed fact!" another man said. "How many ears you got on that there chain now, A.J.?"

"How many I got, Travis?"

Travis felt old shame and disgust welling inside of him. The little man had beaten him again. Why hadn't he gone to the peaches, where he belonged, when the boy told him of the stampedes? Because now home, he wanted to put off

seeing Bowie as long as possible? Because now he'd decided not to try to kill him, because now he had hope and cared what he did again, the little man made him afraid? Was that possible?

"Who's the town marshal here?" A.J. inquired, pointedly turning away from Travis.

"Ain't none," one of the men said. "Just over in Tombstone. Them Earp brothers."

"I heard of them. What kind of men are they?"

"Independent as hell."

"I reckon that's why my people took so long in getting word on this here Bowie."

"They shoulda got holt of the sheriff, A.J. He takes care of us here in the valley. Keep his pockets lined with silver and his tongue slick with red eye, he'll take real good care of you." The man's laugh was uneven with phlegm.

They were all laughing and smiling and fawning over the little man. Travis shivered. He drank of the whiskey to warm his cold, throbbing stomach.

"Yes, sir," one of the men was saying, "you brought a good man back to do your work, Travis."

Travis stood up quickly, his broad face reddening. "I didn't bring him back!"

"Sit down, Travis," A.J. said. "Some reputation you got here." He looked quietly around the table. "It's true," he said. "He didn't bring me back."

"I'll swear, A.J.!"

"No fooling?"

"Travis don't need no one to do his work." A.J. paused. "Do you, Travis? Tell them."

"No. No, I don't!" He sat down, despising himself.

"That's right." A.J. was grinning insolently.

"All I can say, Travis," one of the men was saying, "you're back none too soon." He was smiling too.

"Yeah," another one said, "the carrying on of that

brother of yours and your woman—" He shook his head—"something fearful."

"What do you mean?" Travis' heart sank.

"Don't you know?"

"Coon-eyed at the theater and opera house in Tombstone. Holding hands wherever they go—"

"Worse than that," a rancher said from the bar. "My wife says they're laying up, sure as living. Shows all over them. The old woman's got an eye about such things." He waited for A.J. to smile, then snickered himself.

"That's right," the man at the table said.

"You lie!" Travis said. "You're a rotten liar!"

The man at the table rose. "Nobody calls me a liar."

A.J. waved him down.

"I know, A.J., but nobody calls me that."

"It's talk!" Travis shouted. "Filthy gossip! You were talking about her before I left. You still are, that's all. It's nothing but filthy gossip!"

"Is it?" the man said. "Ask anyone in this saloon. Ask Gib Ray." He pointed to the bartender. "Ask him. He'll tell you."

"Some brother, this fellow Bowie," A.J. said. "Kills his Paw, lays up with his own brother's woman."

"He's a hard one, A.J.," another of the men said. "Hard as I ever seen one. Hard with the guns—"

"Hard with his brother's woman?" A.J. said.

They all brayed happily.

Pale and trembling Travis sat there, taking the full blast of it. Hate, jealous, uncertainty, every vile emotion he'd ever despised coursed through him.

But Zoanna wouldn't do that! He fumed at himself. And Bowie, Bowie surely wouldn't! Bowie—! A.J.'s pitted face mocked him.

"I've had about enough of this, A.J.!" Travis exploded.

"All I can take. I'm getting out to those peaches where I belong. Now."

"Too late," one of the men said. "You ain't going to find any there."

A.J. sighed. "He only pushes so far, boys." He grinned at Travis. "I brought you this far safely. I don't aim to lose you before the fun starts. How far is it to them peaches?"

"Eight or nine miles," one of his companions said. "An easy two-hour ride."

"The sun?"

The man nodded. "Just about raising then."

Travis lifted the almost full whiskey bottle from the table and drank deeply. He corked the bottle and shoved it in his waistband.

"And at your back, A.J.!" he added savagely, turning on his heel.





AT THE BARE unpainted table the woman worked slowly with bread and cold side meat, the coal oil lamp at her side casting a greasy arc of light over the small glowing wood stove and the double-tiered bunk.

Sitting on the edge of the lower bunk, Bowie lifted his head from his hands. The woman's shadow was a huge, dark, silent fortress against the far wall. He stretched. Every joint in his body creaked for rest.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

The woman went on with her preparations. They were all alone in the little overnight cabin by the side of the creek. Tote had gone back to town and the three Mexicans, Compadre, Appolonio and Julio, had gone home taking the boy with them. The woman had stayed, saying she would help clean up. There was more to it than that and now he wanted to face it quickly.

"You haven't eaten all night." She was insistent.

"I don't want anything, I said." Her hands froze on the table. He shook his head. She wasn't to blame. "I'm just tired, Zoanna. Dead-tired."

"It's all right," she said tonelessly. She went to the stove, felt of the coffee pot and poured a cup of coffee. She brought it over to him at the bunk.

"Drink this," she commanded.

He took the cup gratefully. Through the single win-

dow of the cabin he could see the sky graying, the dark clouds scudding swiftly behind the early morning breeze. The first sun was only an hour away now.

He let the coffee scald and bruise his throat and belly. "I failed, Zoanna," he said, his nose and eyes buried in the cup.

The woman stood over him, soft, warm, compelling, dark-limned by the lantern on the table.

"You did everything you could," she said. "More than a human could be expected to do. No one could have saved those peaches." Her fingers stirred in his hair, riffling it. "Did you want to get yourself killed too?"

"It might have been best for everybody."

"Don't talk like that. When you say that, you say I should be dead too."

"It's not your fault." He looked up at her quickly. "It's mine. What I've done."

"And I too," she said so low he almost missed it.

"Why did he have to come back now? Right now?"

"Sometimes there's a fate in people's lives they just can't escape." She smiled unevenly. "You'll never know how long I've been thinking about that."

"I *knew* he had to come back. I didn't want to believe it. I did a great wrong, Zoanna. To him, to my own brother. Kept on doing it, too, hoping he would never return. I told myself the first time was excusable. The second and third time, and all the others, I told myself you weren't good for Travis, that you weren't really married yet, anyway. I knew I was lying. I was weak, Zoanna. Weak with you. Paw used to say I was rotten seed."

He drank more coffee, feeling his belly constrict under the hot thrust of liquid. "Well," his voice was a dark sigh, "he's back now. I've danced to the fiddler."

"He's been gone a long time. He could be out of that notion he had."

"Then he finds out about us."

"How?"

"People talk, you know that, Zoanna. We weren't exactly private in everything we did. There's bound to be gossip."

"There's been gossip about me before. It doesn't prove anything."

"If he asks you?"

"All a lie. Idle talk. You were just like a brother should be"—Bowie winced—"treating kindly his brother's girl."

He shook his head. "Supposing he wants to get married?"

"I—I couldn't."

"Then he'd know."

"Well, what of it?" Impatience, anger shrilled her voice. "Do you want me to marry him?"

"Do you, Zoanna?"

Her hand flashed out at him, stinging the side of his face.

"What kind of an awful woman do you think I am?"

Firmly he grabbed her hands and held them. "You were going to marry him once."

"That was once."

"Did you ever love him the way you loved me?"

"Do you have to be so cruel?"

"Did you?"

"Yes. Just once. He'd never have proposed if I hadn't. What did you expect me to say? Did you want me to lie? Oh, Bowie, things have changed. Is it so hard for you to believe anyone could love you?"

Limply he released her hands.

She knelt in front of him.

"I do. I love you, Bowie. Once, maybe I could have married Travis and been happy with him. Not now, not any more. Is that wrong?" Her arms went around him. "Bowie, you're the only man I ever loved."

"It's a bad love."

She kissed the welted ridge along his cheek. "Don't ever say that. To some folks it might appear that. But to me, never."

He rolled wearily onto the bunk, his long legs sticking out over the end piece. He dropped one hand over his eyes.

"Supposing—supposing Travis still wants to shoot it out with you?" Her silken red hair brushed his chest.

"I'll have to give him satisfaction."

"I don't want him killed."

"Neither do I." He laughed harshly. His hands moved in aimless circles over her back. "Everything's closing in on me, Zoanna. Everything. Like it has for years now. I don't know, Zoanna. I don't know any more."

She slid onto the bunk alongside him and cradled his head on her bosom.

"You're tired, Bowie."

"I don't want to move. Ever."

"You don't have to." Suddenly, she jerked upright. "Bowie! That little man Mica saw with Travis, who was he?"

"A.J. Dunit. He's a hired killer. I'll have to stand up to him."

"A hired killer? Did Travis bring him back—for this?"

"No. Least I don't think so. Something I did once in Cheyenne. You might say I hurt a man's pride. Two men, to be exact. Now I've got to pay for it."

"Men! Pride! Guns! Does everything always have to be settled with a gun?"

He didn't answer. He was spoken out, exhausted by words. They'd never solved anything for him.

"Bowie, you do love me," she whispered, "you do. Let's run from here. Let's get out of here now with what we have. I don't belong here either any more, Bowie. I'm an

outcast like you. I made my choice. I'll abide by it. Bowie—"

He closed his eyes.

She moved strongly against him. Her cool, exploring hands worked on him. He was bone-weary, completely spent after three sleepless nights of fighting stampedes, his nerves raw-edged over Travis' return; yet, still, amazingly, he found himself stirred by the potent force and pull of this woman.

She was shifting and squirming in her dress. "You do love me, Bowie," she was saying over and over. "You do." She moved tight against him, her smooth flesh vibrant, on fire to his swollen touch. The sky was lightening through the window. He must get out of bed, get up. He must. Slowly his numb fingers slipped along the formidable arch of her breasts, the slope of her belly, the soft, downy incline of her thighs. With our last breath, he thought, with our last gasp of air, we can still do this. His mouth fought for her soft warm breasts. He cleaved to her. Her hands were rough and strong and insistent. They rolled him over on top of her.

He was gone in an instant, in small, smothered, agonizing cries. She was triumphant. She had saved her only weapon for just such an emergency. She had used it, and she felt she had won. "You see, Bowie," her voice caressed him, "it's you and me. You love me. You always will. We can run, Bowie, we can be happy somewhere else."

He was shaking quietly on her breasts, the tears running salty and warm on the soft white flesh. They never understood. You could love them but you couldn't make them understand there were other things just as important and just as necessary to a man. A man had to act like a man. How could he tell her about a white mule, for instance?

"There's no running," he mumbled. "He'd find us if he wanted to bad enough. Besides—he was Travis' father too."

She was very still. "There's no hope for us, then?" Her voice broke. "There's got to be!"

She put her arms around his head, laid his tormented face between her breasts.

Quietly she began to sing. An old lullaby her mother had sung to her, and she had sung to Mica. *When the mountains were not so tall or the sky so high . . .* Softly, she crooned it now to the dark mutilated head.

His breathing was heavier, deeper. How can he sleep? she wondered. How can he? Travis would be here soon. And the other man, come to seek him. Mica said they were coming at dawn. She looked at the sky through the small square of window. The sun would be rising in another half-hour at most.

"Bowie," she whispered, fighting her own great weariness, "Bowie." She said it over and over. She closed her eyes tightly. "Just one minute more," she murmured. "Let him have one minute more—" She rocked him on her quivering white bosom, buried her lips on the hard corded ridge of his cheek.

THE EARTH had its tug, and the sky, and the mountains too. Even the air here smelled different. Clean and cool and dry. A man could draw deep and taste it all the way down to his vitals. You couldn't do that with Wyoming air, or Kansas air, or Texas air even. It was the sharp volcanic pitch of the soft-toned violet mountains, the thrust of the broad-backed opal mesas, the wind-turned shimmering sand, and baked gray bur sage of the desert that filtered the air, giving it its special quality.

This is my home, Travis was thinking. My land, my mountains, my sky. Not Bowie's—this time, mine! This is where I want to raise my family and live out my life. He reached back into his saddlebag and lifted out the bottle of whiskey. His powerful bull neck hunched down as he angled his face up for the bottle.

The little shadowy figure on the big horse next to him said, "Ain't polite, Travis, not to offer any to your friends."

"I didn't know I had any friends." He corked the bottle and returned it to the saddlebag.

They forded the river now, leaving the last lights of town behind them. The chunking of the stamp mill grew fainter as they clattered up the small round-faced rocks on the slope of the far bank. They passed through a shower of fine white wispy catkins trailing down from the

cottonwood trees, and then were out in the grasslands heading south for the creek and the purple loom of the Huachuca Mountains.

Down by the river a rooster crowed, beckoning the sun above the mountains. All he could see of the river now were the shadowy gray shapes of the cottonwoods, willows and sycamores that bordered it. About there would be Zoanna's house, he figured, and that light must be the Murphys getting ready for the morning chores. And about there, somewhere in those great dark trees, would be his own house that he had not seen for eight long months.

He helped himself to another drink.

They ascended the slow slope of the grass bowl as the sky brightened in the east. In the distance, by the creek, a dozen wing-braking buzzards circled lower and lower under the swift-moving greasy clouds.

The man beside him was inspecting his guns now. Taking each weapon from its holster, checking to see it was loaded, spinning the chamber, slipping it up and down in its holster to make sure it moved easily.

Watching him, Travis suddenly found himself looking down the funnel of years. Remembering again a small boy's big words to his younger brother. "We aren't ever going to die, Shug," that boy had said so confidently, so surely. "We're just going to live forever and then turn into old white mules."

He clenched his fists and the sweat moved in his hands. This pock-faced creature with the necklace of ears was going to kill Bowie! The whiskey no longer stung his throat.

"You better put that stuff away," A.J. said, "and check your guns too."

"I don't have to!" Travis said. "I'm not going to use mine."

"Not on the man who killed your Paw? Not on the



man who's laying up with your woman?" A.J. was grinning at him.

Travis rode silently. His head was fogged now with an unwanted picture of the woman he had once been going to marry and the man accused of laying up with her.

"Travis, when's the last time you seen him?"

"Three years, maybe," he answered reluctantly, trying to hang on to his own image of Bowie and Zoanna.

"What's it to you, A.J.?"

"Before that, you seen him when?"

"Every three, four years. What difference—"

"Might say he's almost a stranger then?"

"Let me be, A.J.!"

The little man grinned.

The grass was trampled here, beaten and crushed into the earth by thousands of close-packed hooves. They followed the swath cut in the green earth toward the creek. Now they could make out what the buzzards were after. Two great clumps of dead cattle lay straight ahead crawling with the black, winged, picking birds. The stench reminded Travis of Wyoming and Old Cayo and the sheep.

Travis and A.J. reined up short. On their left the sun was waiting just behind the mountains. In front of them lay the cold ashes of all the fires that had defended the orchard. In the cool, breeze-clean morning earth the trees lay blossom-smashed and fallen. The dark, hoof-crisped earth was pink with the scattered blossoms. Not a tree was standing.

"Looks like he put up a good fight, anyway," A.J. said, nodding his head appreciatively.

Travis' eyes blurred. Sixteen rows, he was thinking. Thirty-three trees to a row—five hundred twenty-eight cuttings—five acres. Take them out of the sawdust, plant them twenty apart. Break your back digging the irrigation

ditch from the creek. Burn your eyes and skin with sulfur spraying them; prune them; plow the weeds out for three hard years. For what? For this? Three brute years of his father's life and his own lying there stomped into the earth, with the delicate pink flowers over it all to mock him. The first home-grown commercial peaches in Arizona! His hands balled at his side, the knuckles white.

In a daze he let his horse pick its way through the twisted broken trees. Halfway, A.J. halted him.

"Ain't that a cabin at the head of the orchard?" A.J. said. "They's a trace of smoke coming from up there." His tone cooled. "They's two horses tied behind that cottonwood, too. You recognize them?"

Travis wiped his eyes and stared. One of them was Zoanna's old gray mare! The other black he didn't know. He tried to swallow and found he couldn't.

"Who are they?" A.J. asked.

"I don't know!" He started to spur his horse through the orchard but A.J. had a tight hold on the reins.

"All right, boy," the little man said icily, "A.J. Dunit takes charge from now on in. Dismount. We walk in from here."

Quickly they dismounted and tied their horses to a fallen peach tree.

Travis' big hands opened and closed. The cords of his broad neck swelled and stiffened. He trembled all over.

A.J.'s cratered face grinned up at him. "All right," he said softly, "let's go see who it is."

IT WAS NIGHT. Stars were all around him. He was running. He ran as hard and as fast as he could. His legs ached; his arms ached; his chest was bursting. Invisible hands crawled out of the desert to pull at him; they snaked out of the tops of the jagged mountains to tear at him. White mules abounded everywhere, in the desert, in the mountains, in the valleys. They stared at him curiously as he ran. One, now, in a box canyon brayed hollowly in his aching ears. "Bowie! Bowie!" it called.

He dredged himself up from the bottomless pit of this enormous sleep. There was a woman's face above him. White, soft, halo-red. "Bowie!" it said. There was no mistaking the urgency in that voice. Who was it? Where was he? Where was that white mule? He shook his groggy head.

"Bowie!"

Zoanna. The cabin. The peaches. He saw now the hysteria edge out and widen her blue eyes. Her fingernails bit sharply at his arms.

"I must have dozed off for a moment," she whispered. "I meant to get us out of here. I did, Bowie!"

He sat up rigidly, his head banging the upper bunk. His gaze fanned past her to the doorway of the small cabin.

The door had been kicked violently open. Two men stood silhouetted against the first light of morning. There

was no mistaking them. Bowie stared at the larger of the two men. He hadn't changed much physically. He was still big, stocky, a little fleshier, maybe, same straight sandy brown hair, same big broad neck, same square face, but there were lines around the taut mouth and the eyes seemed harder than he remembered them. The other man, the ugly little pock-faced man next to him, had his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. This one was grinning.

"I'll be dipped!" he said. "Now ain't this a pretty sight."

Zoanna sagged against Bowie's chest and began to cry softly.

"Hello, Shug," Bowie said quietly. The raw, dark smell of whiskey came to him from the doorway.

Travis didn't answer. His mouth was bloodless, the lower lip trembling slightly. He hadn't taken his eyes from the bunk or the woman.

"Ain't you going to say hello to me, Bowie?" A.J. said. "I been looking for a long time to say that to you."

Bowie eyed the little killer briefly and silently.

A.J. walked over to the stove and felt of the coffee pot. He poured himself a cup. "Right nice of you folks to keep the coffee warm for us. You want a cup, Travis?"

If Travis heard him he gave no indication of it. His mouth remained a thin, quivering line.

The woman raised her head and turned to Travis. "It was those damn peaches!" she cried. "For three days and nights we fought to save your peaches! Bowie fought like a wild man for you and your peaches!" She finished lamely. "We were tired, that's all."

"I'll be dipped!" A.J. said. "You hear that, Travis? They was tired, you hear? So they just laid theirselves down—together." He was watching Travis carefully. The big, blocky man still stood frozen like a pillar of salt in the doorway.

"You shut up, you!" Bowie said. "This isn't your affair."

"Ain't it, Bowie? Ain't it? You'd be surprised. Eight long months I promoted this affair. Yes, sir, a real purty sight. A man goes out on the trail for eight long months hunting his brother who killed his Paw, finally decides not to shoot it out with him, then comes home to find his brother in bed with his own woman. This time I'll be dipped for sure."

They were all watching Travis. He stood there dazed, the muscles of his jaws flexing and unflexing with the battle he was fighting.

A.J. slugged loudly of his coffee. "Pretty clever of you killing your Paw, leaving, and then doubling back to hide out here."

"He didn't come back to hide out here!" Zoanna said. "He came back to see Travis." Her eyes pleaded with Travis as she clutched the blanket around her now. "I convinced him not to write you. I told him that time would cool you off and bring you to your senses. It was all my doing, not his. Can't you see that?"

"And whose idea was this?" A.J. said. "Yours too, ma'am?"

"Shut up, A.J.!" Travis snapped. His face was ghost-white. "Like Bowie said, this isn't your affair." He licked his lips, and turned to Zoanna. He spoke haltingly. "They said in town—you two were carrying on. I didn't believe them. I couldn't."

"You always listen to what other people say," Zoanna cried. "You're so easily led."

"Like you led me once? Did you do that to Bowie too? I heard what people in this valley said about you before. I never believed it. Now. You—you—"

"Jezebel," she said.

"Jezebel," he shouted.

"That'll do, Travis," Bowie said. "Whatever you may think she's done, she's still a woman."

"Is she?"

"It's not what you think, Shug."

"Then what is it, man? What are you doing in bed with the woman I was supposed to marry. Tell me, for God's sakes! Tell me!"

Involuntarily Bowie flinched. Here in front of him was a man on fire, his own brother. What was it? he wanted to know. Well, what was it? How could he tell him? In a fit of vengeful anger he had raped his brother's woman? Had taken her later because of his own great weakness and need? That out of this—out of this—had grown love? Impossible. How could he explain this?

"It's a long story," he said.

"We've got nothing but time," A.J. said.

Travis glanced at A.J. sharply. "I'm waiting, Bowie."

Bowie locked his brother's deep-boring eyes. There was no pity, no will to believe there. "I fell in love," he said wearily, knowing how inadequate it sounded. "I fought it, but I couldn't help it. I'm only flesh and blood. If it helps, I know it was a bad thing I did to you, Travis. That's all I can say."

"I'm in love with him too, Travis," Zoanna said quickly. "And it isn't a bad thing. I don't think I was ever in love with you, Travis. Not like this."

"You said you loved me."

"Yes," she whispered. "I wanted a father for Mica."

"Great Lord!" Travis' fist pounded the table. "Great Lord! Must I suffer this final humiliation, too?"

"Hallelujah and amen!" A.J. said. "Ask him about your Paw."

"Yes!" Travis said. "Paw? What about him?"

"Does he have to be in here, Travis, this little ear chopper, to hear all this?"

"Yes, he does!"

"All right," Bowie said. "You know why I killed Paw."

He killed Maw. He was responsible for her death just as sure as I'm lying in this bunk now. Sick as she was, he beat her and worked her to death. Used the money I sent home for medicine and her care for those damn peaches."

"It was her idea to use your money for the peaches. If you'd gotten home more often, you'd have known that."

"If she did it was only to make you two happy. All I know is what I see and hear with my own eyes and ears. You know I've seen plenty. All these years."

"You had no right to set yourself up as judge and jury."

"Maw was the only person in this whole world who ever treated me decent. I had every right."

"Then I have too." Travis' bull neck reddened. His big jaw jutted forward. "I'm going to kill you, Bowie!"

"In bed?" said Bowie coldly. "Or are you going to let us dress first?"

"Dress then! We'll be waiting right outside!"

"Take his guns, Travis," A.J. said. "We don't want him getting any ideas till we're ready."

"That's right." Travis gathered up Bowie's gun belt and the two rifles from the upper bunk and followed A.J. out the door. "Hurry it up now," he flung back. "Get out of that bed!"

"Yes, sir," Bowie answered.

Zoanna rolled out of bed quickly and slipped into her undergarments while Bowie pulled on his pants.

"What's going to happen now?" Her eyes wouldn't focus clearly on him. They skipped away and back, and away again.

"I reckon there'll be a shooting."

"What are you going to do?" Fear scurried in the zigzag of that quick glance.

"Defend myself." He felt listless now, and broken inside. His world had shriveled and died when Travis walked through that door.

Her hand gripped his arm. "I don't want him killed. Bowie—I—I couldn't stand it."

"Would it be easier if I were killed?"

"Bowie, I didn't mean that. I'd die if you were killed. You know what I mean."

"I know," he said more gently. He studied her intently, watching every movement of the familiar hands and face and body as she buttoned up her dress and smoothed the cloth over the soft, powerful flange of her hips.

"You're going home now," he said.

Startled, her eyes held his firmly. "I'm not leaving here," she said.

"Get home to your boy where you belong. It's liable to be very rough here shortly."

"I'm—"

"I said you're going! I can handle Travis. Don't worry about that!" He clothed the hollowness of his conviction by speaking quickly and with vigor. "But I'll have to face the little one. I don't want you around then." He reached for her and she slid into his arms. "If I don't face him now I'll have to face him later. He'll never give up. You understand?"

He felt her shaking against him.

"I love you." He spoke it awkwardly and painfully into her hair. "Remember that. Whatever happens today, I loved you."

"Bowie—!"

"Anything happens to me I wish you and Travis could get back together. He'll get over this anger. Every once in a while he used to get angry like this as a boy. Never lasted long. I wish you could. He's a good boy. He's solid, dependable, a hard worker. Me, I've been drifting here and there all these years just like tumbleweed looking for a place to light. I'd make a mighty poor husband."

She put her fingers over his mouth, shook her head



fiercely against his chest. "How can you be so naïve about some things! It's you, Bowie. You. It's only you I want! Only you I can have! Don't you understand?"

He nodded helplessly. He kissed the top of her head.

She looked up at him, her eyes blurred, her cheeks tear-furrowed. "I have the most awful feeling," she whispered. "I feel sick, Bowie. Sick."

His fingers tightened and sank deep into the softness of her waist and back. He crushed her closer against him, silencing her. When the panic was gone from her he loosened his grip and stepped away. He forced a smile across the welted roughness of his face. It tightened the skin along his cheekbones and hurt. He wanted to say something comforting and lasting to this woman who had been his for so short a time.

His speech was a sigh, a deep, chest-wracking sigh. He was completely spoken out.

The door of the little cabin burst inward and A.J. Dunit stepped inside, Bowie's gun belt draped across his shoulder. Strangely, Bowie felt relieved to see the little man. Here was something he knew how to fight.

"Took you long enough," A.J. said. He turned back. "You coming, Travis?"

"I'm coming!" Travis brushed past him and stood uncertainly in the middle of the small room. His broad face was beet-red, lathered with perspiration.

"You been drinking, Travis!" Zoanna said.

A.J. cocked an eye at the woman, then at Travis. "I swear, ma'am," he said mockingly, "I don't know what to do with him. He's getting to be a regular little drinker, Travis is. He sure ain't the same boy I first met up in that Wyoming sheep country." He winked at her. "I got to watch him all the time now."

"Give him back his guns," Travis said roughly.

"In time, in time."

"I'm sending the woman home," Bowie said. "She has a boy to look after. Any objections?"

"Let her go," Travis mumbled.

She started for the door, stopped, looked at Bowie, then at Travis. "No gun-shooting, please, Travis. Bowie?" Her voice broke.

A.J. laughed till he shook. "Thanks for the coffee, ma'am." He guided her to the door and shut it quickly behind her. "Big, meaty redheads, I always liked them too. I can see now why you two boys been in heat over that bitch."

"You talk pretty big about a woman in front of a man with no guns, runt," Bowie said, letting the edge slide into his voice.

"Runt?" A.J. hurled him his gun belt. "There's your guns, big man!"

Bowie caught the belt, strapped it on, and tied down his holsters. He took out each gun and checked the chambers. They were empty. He looked up at A.J. for an instant and refilled the chambers before holstering the twin Colts.

"All right, Travis," A.J. said quickly, "he's got his guns. Let's get this over with. You want him, don't you?"

Travis gaped at the little man. "You unloaded his guns!"

"Sure I did."

"Why?"

"For you, boy. For you. I didn't want to take no chances. He's fool enough not to check his guns, it's his own funeral."

"He lies, Shug," Bowie said. "It wasn't for you. It was for himself. I don't check them he takes me, not you. He doesn't care whether you live or die. He wants you to go against me first now so he can watch me draw. His kind never takes any more chances than they have to."

"Is that true, A.J.? You'd shoot a man with an unloaded gun?"

"I told you everything's fair when you shoot a man long as he's facing you. What's the matter, you getting scared? You want me to kill him? You get no satisfaction that way. He killed your Paw; he laid up with your woman like a common dog. What kind of a man are you?"

"Don't let him rile you, Shug. He's a rotten, foul-mouthed little bastard!"

A.J.'s face tightened, his small nostrils pinched. "You want him or don't you?" he said without a smile.

Travis drew a deep breath. "I want him," he said.

"He might get off a lucky shot, A.J. He might get me." Bowie veiled the urgency in his voice. "Are you afraid, A.J., to take me alone, first, without checking, man to man? I was the fastest man on the Salt Fork ten years ago. There were some pretty fair gunhands there. Billy Tilghman, Bat Masterson, Charlie Bassett, Wyatt Earp, Dutch Henry—" Bowie was trying everything possible now to get to the little man. If he got to the little man and got by him there'd be a chance. "I'm the fastest man you ever drew against, A.J.," he went on. "You've got the reputation of being the deadliest little killer in these parts. They say no man ever got away with calling you names. I'm calling you yellow. A yellow-bellied little bastard! I say you're afraid to go up against a man who might have a chance against you." He started over. "Travis might get off a lucky shot."

"Ain't much chance," A.J. said thickly.

"Yellow-bellied little bastard." Bowie repeated it slowly.

Travis, wide-eyed now, watched the two men.

"He might at that," A.J. said slowly. He paused to study it. "I reckon you'll have to wait, Travis."

"I won't. I want satisfaction."

A.J. glanced witheringly at him. "You don't get no satisfaction now, boy. Too bad." He opened the door. "I'll be waiting for you outside," he said to Bowie. "That big mouth of yours won't do you much good out there. From here on, come prepared to shoot, not to talk." Stiff-legged, the pock-faced man stalked out through the door.

Bowie turned to his brother. He searched the younger man's face a long moment. "She's a good woman, Shug. You don't know how hard she tried for you. Wasn't her fault."

Travis' mouth twitched convulsively.

"We never did have our proper talk," Bowie said gently. "Never did."

"He'll have the sun at his back," Travis said, forcing each word.

"I know. Thanks, Shug." At the door he stopped, his back to his brother. "One last thing." He didn't turn around. "Old Cayo, the sheepherder—did you ever run across him, by any chance?"

"Yes."

"We talked, Shug, like I never talked to any other man. Like I never could talk." He couldn't bear to ask the question. "He never laughed, Shug." What was the use? Travis' silence was filled with it. "Is he—?"

"One ear missing."

Still with his back to his brother Bowie loosened his guns in their holsters. He flexed his right hand several times. He pulled each finger of his right hand until the stiffness was gone. "I'll be seeing you, Shug," he said. He stepped outside quickly.

THE EARLY MORNING SUN was eye-squinting bright after the cool gray shadowiness of the little cabin. The great sky was mostly blue now, with white cabbage clouds churning up beyond the mountains. High up in the green cottonwood sparrows were chittering. The creek made its slow and lazy purl over the round glazed rocks far below.

He blinked his eyes rapidly. There was the little man facing him down there to one side of the big cottonwood where he and Zoanna had once picnicked so long ago. He was a dark shadow limned by the sun behind him, one hand above the far mountains.

Bowie started slowly down the clearing, his hands hanging long and loose at his sides. He was remembering the buffalo hunters at the Salt Fork in '72. He was remembering a jawfest at night around the campfire and Billy Tilghman saying, "If you got to kill a man the best time to do it is six in the morning when his fingers is stiff and cold, when he ain't fully awake, when you got the sun low and blinding behind you."

He wasn't underrating the little man in front of him. A.J. Dunit was the best. He was a businessman who went by the book. Still, even the most skilled businessman could be fooled once. There was never a second time.

It had been a long time since he cared whether he was

the best and fastest man with a gun. It was strange how you outgrew some things, but not others. Now, remembering Old Cayo, he cared again. Cared too much. He wished he'd kept practicing more lately. Still, standing up against a man was different than facing a tree or a target that couldn't shoot back. You had to be cool and fast, but not too fast. You couldn't afford to miss, and not with a man like A.J. Dunit, who was the best.

"That's far enough," the little man's words scraped across his bleak thoughts. He stopped, planting his legs wide apart to take the waver out of them. They were about forty-five feet apart now, far enough so that both speed and accuracy would count, with the premium on accuracy.

"Any last words you got?" A.J. said. "You ain't got much time."

"Any last words you got, A.J.?"

"How many men I killed, Travis? How many ears I got on my chain, now? Thirty-nine or forty?"

"None of your damn business!" Travis shouted from the open doorway.

Bowie laughed strongly and loudly. "None of your damn business, runt!"

"I ain't going to shoot you between the eyes," A.J. said. "You're going to die slow. I ain't never wanted a man to die so slow. I'm going to put my lead in your belly. I ain't never had a bigger target. Scarecrow."

"That's where I'll be aiming then, runt—for Old Cayo."

"They said you was cool as ice and never riled," A.J. said. "All right, we'll see. Go for it!"

"I'll give you first move," Bowie said, sharpening the insolence in his voice. "I said your move." He hesitated a long moment. "Yellow-bellied little bastard. Yellow-bellied—" He didn't have to say it twice.

A.J.'s right hand was diving like a snake for his gun.

Bowie dropped to the earth clearing leather as he fell. He had to get A.J. silhouetted against the tree and the mountains. It was an old move, but the only one he could make.

Effortlessly A.J. drew off the first shot, driving a bullet into the fleshy part of Bowie's left shoulder as he fell. Too quickly then, A.J. thumbed another whining shot over his head. Bowie had his gun free. Blood and gristle distended his throat, thundered in his ears. He fought his haste back. He fired prone, once, twice, three times.

He saw the little man mince back quickly as if he were running backward. He saw him stop, shock, astonishment squinching his face, gaping his mouth wide-open. His gun drooped and slipped from his hand into the dirt. Slowly he bent and chopped to his knees like a broken rag doll. He lurched back against the base of the cottonwood.

Shakily, breathing heavily, Bowie rose. Each nerve in his body stung him now. Blood streamed hot and gummy down his left armpit. He walked slowly, rubber-legged, over to the little man. He picked up the fallen gun and removed the other one from its holster. The little man was holding his belly in. His small black eyes were wide with wonder.

"You beat me," he said huskily. "A.J. Dunit."

"No, you beat me, A.J.," Bowie said, all the hate gone from him now. No matter what he was before, this man was dying. No longer was he the great A.J. Dunit, the fearsome legend. He was a pitiful, inconsequential, shattered little man, face to face with the big darkness. Bowie could no longer look him in the eye.

"Was a good move you made," A.J. said. "Didn't fool me none, though." He grinned lopsidedly. "You riled me, calling me that—a bastard. You riled me—" He coughed blood.

"You riled me, A.J., killing Old Cayo."

"Old Cayo?"

"The old man who had the sheep in Wyoming."

"Him? That lousy sheepherder?"

"That lousy sheepherder. He was my friend."

He turned on his heel and started for the cabin. It was through, done with.

"Bowie!" Travis yelled from the doorway of the cabin. "Lookout! He's got a hideout!"

Whirling, Bowie ducked. A.J. had slipped the derringer out of his boot. Bowie cleared his gun and shredded A.J.'s right arm with two quick shots. He advanced on the little man and kicked the derringer far away from the tree.

Travis came running up. "You all right, Bowie?"

"I'm all right."

Travis straddled A.J. The pock-faced little man grinned weakly. "You damned little sneak!" Travis said.

"Easy, Shug," Bowie said. "He's bad hurt."

"He beat me, Travis. He beat me." There were tears in the little man's eyes.

Suddenly Travis kneeled beside him. "I'll get you inside."

"No!" A.J. said. "Don't touch me."

"I'll get you a doctor."

"Ain't no use, boy. Ask Bowie."

Bowie shook his head. "Don't think so."

"I'm sorry, A.J.," Travis said.

"Ain't no need to be sorry. Ain't there something in that black book of yours about this—'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'? Did I say it good? Boy? Did I?" Small flecks of saliva and blood speckled his thin lips. The pain left his eyes for an instant. He grinned his old ugly, mocking grin. "He killed your Paw," he said. "He stole your woman."

Slowly Bowie walked away.

"Ain't there something in that black book of yours about



that, too?" A.J. was saying haltingly. "About killing your father, laying with your brother's woman? Oh, boy, I got a big hole in me!" From far away Bowie could hear the little man crying.

The blood seeped slowly from his torn shoulder. It was the same shoulder that Zoanna had put a bullet through so very long ago in those smooth-faced rocks along the ridge. Sitting there in the sun on the stoop of the cabin, he thought this as strange as the fact that he felt no pain now.

Down by the big cottonwood Travis was still kneeling by the dying A.J. Below him the blossoms of the fallen peach trees lay pink against the black, rain-moist earth. Beyond them the grass rolled green, high and curling out to the dark line of the river.

He was glad he had sent the woman home. Glad she didn't have to see this. And what was to come. What was to come? A tiny wrinkle of fear eddied and spiraled along the back of his arms.

Down by the tree Travis rose wearily like a very old man. Slowly he trudged back toward Bowie. Bowie counted each step. At fourteen Travis stopped. His eyes were tired and red and very dead. The smell of stale whiskey came out of him and soiled the sunlight.

"Pretty country, this," Travis said. His head swung slowly in a 180-degree arc, then back. "Too bad about the peaches. I thank you for what you did."

"It wasn't much," Bowie said.

"Paw would have liked what you did."

Bowie scanned the broad, open face before him. For a moment hope flickered in his heart. "I'm glad he didn't have to see it."

"They couldn't be saved," Travis said.

He saw the torment stir and brighten in his brother's eyes, and the fear clutched at Bowie's back.

Bowie traced a finger in the dirt. Dark shame was shutting off all air in his throat.

"You remember, Bowie," Travis said finally, "when we were kids boiling that Indian skull, making us what you called a Sam Houston souvenir, you remember what you said?"

Bowie looked up. He tried desperately to catch his breath.

"'We aren't ever going to die, Shug,' you said. 'We're just going to live forever and then turn into old white mules.'"

Bowie's corded face reddened.

"You remember that, Bowie?"

"I remember, Shug. I've never forgotten it."

Travis stared out over the cabin. The fat white clouds foamed across the vast blue roof of the sky.

"It was a lie you told me," he said at last.

"It doesn't have to be," Bowie said too loudly.

Travis turned to look at A.J., then back to Bowie. It was quiet in the clearing except for the sparrows. The sun made a man's eyes heavy.

"He's right, Bowie. You killed Paw, you laid with my woman."

Bowie felt too tired to argue, too used up. He shrugged his hands sluggishly on his knees.

"I want satisfaction, Bowie."

"You're drunk."

"I'm not, and you know it. You a coward too now, Bowie?"

The welts on Bowie's face rose and shone like copper.

"I'll haunt you till the day you die!" Travis said.

"You haven't got a chance against me, Shug."

"Don't care. Not much point in living like this."

"What's happened to you, Shug?"

"Nothing's happened to me. What's happened to *you*, Bowie?"

"She's not what you think. I thought once she was. But she isn't. Maybe it doesn't make much sense the way I said it, but you know what I mean. She can't help being the way she is. She's not a bad woman."

"I know what she is."

"No—no, you don't," Bowie said wearily.

"I want satisfaction, Bowie."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Come out here into the sun."

"We going to gun each other? Does it finally come to this? Us?"

Travis licked his lips. He swallowed. He nodded his head.

"I always looked after you, Shug."

"Yes, you were always doing for me. You even did me out of the woman I was going to marry. I wonder what you were doing me out of as kids when I didn't know any better." There were revulsion and pain and uncertainty struggling together in those wide brown eyes.

Bowie faltered under it. He stood up and placed a hand against the wall of the small cabin for balance. His legs were hollow. His shoulder felt stiff. Slowly he followed Travis out into the brighter sunlight of the clearing.

"This all right?" he said. They were no more than seven paces apart.

"All right," Travis said. His hands hung rigidly at his sides. On his right hip he wore his gun in its holster tied down low on his leg. On his left side, almost waist high, he wore another gun, bare, stud-hooked on a metal plate.

Big, clumsy-handed, earth-bound Travis. Which gun would he go for? Which hand to watch? Probably the little killer, Dunit, had taught him to get off a shot or two

out of that swivel gun, inaccurate though it was. Bowie knew that trick. When a man wore two guns he never watched either hand. He concentrated on a point six inches above his belly. Here he could see best any hand or arm movement on either side.

What am I thinking about? he wondered dully. Sizing him up like he was just another man that I hated, and not my brother. Well, he is my brother and I don't hate him.

Truth is—he couldn't face the next thought. He was feeling like that Mexican general at Mier, gazing at the assembled Texan prisoners in front of him, knowing in his own two hands, in the earthen crock, he held the power of life and death. In that crock had been black beans and white beans, white for life, black for death. By slightly tilting the crock the black ones could be made easier or harder to get for each prisoner as he stepped up to reach inside.

Looking at the taut, sun-streaked face of his brother Bowie knew he held the same power. He could tilt the crock too. He could deal him a white bean or a black bean. The black one was easy. The white one? His left wrist came up to his mouth. Yes, he could give him that one. But at what price? The Alamo? His legs stirred, turning to jelly in rebellion at the thought. He dropped his wrist away hastily.

Suddenly he was in a vast hurry to get on with this. To get it over with.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he said.

Travis stood there numbly.

"Draw, damn you!" But there was no anger in the way he said it.

"You first, Bowie." Travis' voice cracked.

"Draw, I said!" There ought to be some way to stop it, Bowie thought. I can see it in his face. I know it in my

own heart. Yet there's no stopping. We're both cornered now, cornered good. "Draw!" he shouted.

"Draw!" A.J. Dunit said feebly, grinning, spitting blood. Travis stood stolid, unhearing.

Bowie had a maddening impulse, then, to reach out and touch the corduroy-ridged bark of the cottonwood tree, to feel its rough, ribbed edges stick and cling once more against his callused fingertips. Stop it! he told himself angrily.

"All right," he said cinching his voice down with difficulty, "you've got till I count three, Shug—to catch your white mule. One—"

The sun was yellow and bright as the promise of a boy's dream.

"Two—"

The clouds were soft and white as the haven of a woman's breast.

"Three!"

And blood was red! red! red!

Bowie dug for his gun. His hand reacted as fast as it ever had in his life. It was a good clean movement, the kind a man could be proud of, the gun riding up easily into his hand, his right thumb joint rolling back the hammer as the gun cleared holster.

Travis was still groping awkwardly for his own gun deep in the right side holster.

"Brother, brother," Bowie moaned softly. "My brother." He was crying. He pulled the trigger four times.



FROM THE MOMENT he'd barged into the little cabin with A.J. Dunit something had broken loose inside of him. Hot, venomous hate scoured every tissue of his body. It was an emotion he had never fully known before. In eight months he thought he'd experienced them all. He hadn't. The intensity of this stunned him. All he wanted to do was kill! But not the woman. Oddly, his passion wasn't directed at her, only at the man, his brother, the man who had betrayed him. The man who must always have betrayed him.

He'd fought this strange, violent passion with silence. Hoping for this mad, swollen, devil's curse to pass as everything passed. But it hadn't passed. Until now. When it was too late.

One thing it had done, it had left him clean, free of fear. He was not afraid to die now. He would accept the bullet as a man should. Bowie would be sure with him. Bowie wouldn't let him suffer as he had A.J. Dunit.

Poor Bowie. He could even feel sorry for him now. Standing there as tall as Saul, his back straight as a Hereford, his long face corded with busted hide.

He was counting. "One—"

What had Zoanna said? "You're so easily led?" Well, he hadn't been led into this. *He* had led.

"Two—"

Had he? He refused to cringe from it now. He knew why he was here, why there was no other place for a man like him to go. He knew what he really was now, too. He had reforged a part of himself in these last eight months, but in eight months a man doesn't become much more than he always was. *To be as other men*. In the end he had not had the strength to fail. He had never had it. There was just no other place to go.

"Three—"

The sacrificial lamb! At last the act of redemption! The strange thought intruded as Bowie streaked for his gun. Bowie was good; Bowie was fast. Travis went for his own gun. He jerked for the right-hand gun, the holster gun. Suddenly, he was unable, unwilling to use the left-hand gun on the swivel plate. It wasn't right; it was false, that gun. His eyes were glued on Bowie. He was the best; he was by far the best. Bowie had his gun free. He was pointing it. Travis steeled himself for the shock of the bullet.

"Dear Lord, Dear Lord . . ." Bowie was crying! The air around him burst into great shards of searing sound. He heard the whine of the bullets pass above him and to the side. In the muzzle blast and smoke he lost count of the shots Bowie had thrown at him. Incredibly he was still standing. He had his own gun out now. He was firing too. Blindly. The gun bucked in his hand. Once, twice. Bowie was still blocking out the sky there, only a few feet away. Tears ran in tiny rivulets down his dusty crag of a face. Travis fired again.

The third shot was a great red flower blossoming just above Bowie's belt. Bowie staggered back, the crumbling mask of his face ripped away by this dark hurt. For a long moment he stood there, teetering. His mouth opened and closed, gulping for air. He pitched forward into the dirt. Clumsily he lunged back up onto his knees.



"You're a terrible shot, Shug," he said. For an instant a smile cleft the ridges of that granite face. He tried to get up. He wobbled like a great buffalo shot through the lights. He fell flat on his stomach in the dirt, right hand still clutching his gun thrust far out in front of him.

Travis stood rooted to the earth. Goose pimple lifted the entire skin of his body. He was unhurt! He was untouched!

Behind him, against the tree, A.J. croaked weakly, "He let you kill him, boy. He let you."

Travis whirled on him. The crumpled, pain-stricken little man was holding tight to his belly.

"He missed you purposely, boy. Shot four times, I counted 'em, before you got off one. Missed every time. He didn't miss me." A.J. coughed. "You never used that move I showed you."

Travis wasn't listening now. The first shock wave had passed over him. He was shivering in the bright sunlight. He ran to Bowie and knelt at his head.

He laid a trembling hand on the dark matted hair. "Bowie!"

"Don't touch me, Shug," Bowie said softly, his face in the earth. "I don't feel so good."

Travis couldn't see. With the back of his hand he rubbed his eyes. They filled again, blinding him. "Why didn't you kill me, Bowie?"

"I tried, Shug. You just outgunned me."

"I didn't." His voice shook and finally broke. "I never could. You know that."

"You did this time."

Slowly, very slowly, Bowie turned his head to look at his brother. His eyes were clear, unhurt. He smiled shyly. "You know, Shug, I guess I was just never intended to be an old white mule."

"Great Lord Almighty!"

"But you can, Shug. I know you can. One of us has got to."

Travis smashed at the sides of his head with clenched fists. A great splintering cry strangled in his throat. He threw himself flat on the ground in front of Bowie.

"Shoot me, Bowie! kill me! for God's sakes!"

"Paw said I was rotten seed, Shug. I guess I am. You were always the good one." Bowie gasped again. With each breath now he swept dust over his lips deeper into his lungs. Some of it stuck to his lips. "Listen, Shug, she's all right. She's not a bad woman. She can't help it."

Travis writhed on the dark earth. "Pull the trigger, Bowie. Bowie—help me." He lay in front of Bowie's outstretched right arm, his head in line with the muzzle of the pistol. "Do it, Bowie. Do it fast."

Bowie's breathing cut the air like the strokes of a rusty saw. "You're the good seed, Shug. You always have been."

"The good seed! I'm the good seed!" He dropped his head against the muzzle of the gun. Bowie's finger was still crooked around the trigger. Slowly, Travis placed his own trembling hands over Bowie's finger.

"Dear Lord, forgive me," he said. "Dear Bowie, forgive me too. Please forgive me. I've been mad these past months. Absolutely mad."

"Then — you — just — become — a — man — Shug." He could barely hear Bowie now. "You — always — did — live — in — a — fool's — paradise — Shug — but — at — least — you — weren't boned out — turned — to — dry rot — inside — listen — Shug — she's — all right — she's — all — right . . ."

Travis closed his eyes. "Thy kingdom come . . ." He applied pressure to Bowie's finger. ". . . Thy will be done . . ." He waited for the hammer to fall. He waited

an eternity. He lifted his eyes above the barrel of the gun. Wedged between the firing pin and the hammer was Bowie's thumb.

Into the dust he cried, until the dust turned to mud and caked his lips. He cried till there was nothing left of him to cry.

He raised himself to a sitting position, the ache hunched in his bowed shoulders. He stared dully at the long silent figure stretched in the dirt. He could no longer hear the violent, agonized breathing.

He put his hand under Bowie's chest. It came away red and sticky.

He laid Bowie's head in his lap. He stroked the dark, dusty hair. With his fingertips he gently brushed the dirt from Bowie's cheeks and lips. He closed the sightless eyes. "Let him catch his white mule, Lord," he murmured. "Let him be strong through the withers. Let him be not too big. Let there be no marks on his face."

He didn't know how long he sat there. He didn't know how long A.J. had been calling him. From far away that feeble, frantic cry finally penetrated his consciousness. Slowly he turned to look at the little pock-faced man hanging so tenaciously to life under the big cottonwood.

The midget and the giant. David and Goliath. Who was who? There was no Goliath here.

As in a dream he rose and made his way to the little man. A.J.'s mouth was shiny and crimson with blood. His eyes rolled feverishly in their sockets as he stared at the fat, black buzzards circling in the sky.

What strange, mad twist of fate had brought his brother and this little man to this same dirty patch of sunlight? The Goliath-seekers. Had Bowie finally found his? Had he caught the wind in his fists at last? Had A.J.? Had he, Travis?

"Travis, Travis boy—" the little man was saying. His hands twitched weakly on his belly. "Do me a favor. Promise me? Promise me!"

The sparrows were still chittering high in the cottonwood above the slow waters of the creek, stirring feathery wisps of cotton down onto the little man's long black hair.

"Bury me, Travis, bury me. Promise me you'll do that, Travis. Put a cross over my grave. Put my name on it. A.J. Dunit. A.J. Dunit. Promise me, Travis." The eyes were round and bulging. Tiny bubbles of blood frothed over his lips with each word. "Promise me! My name!"

High against the blue sky a woodcock was flashing an underwing the color of ripe apricot as it banked and plummeted low over the fallen peach trees.

"I promise," he said.

"You're a good boy, Travis. You can have my necklace."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Travis said.

"No, no, you better put my ears in with me. There's someone I'd like to show them to." The little pock-faced man tried to grin. He coughed instead. "Is he dead, Travis? Is he?" He spewed blood. "I beat him, didn't I?" He gaped dumbly at the great black birds wheeling lower in the sky. "He died first?" He coughed, choking on his victory. "On the cross," he whispered, "A.J. Dunit, A.J. Dunit, A.J. Dunit—" The small voice bubbled off.

Far out in the peach orchard a yellow-chested, stilt-legged meadow lark whistled shrilly and kicked his gawky way through the tiny pink blossoms on the dark earth.

PERCHED WAY UP on Table Top Rock far above the river and the green valley below, Mica swung his legs through the shimmering heat waves of the mid-morning sun. He hadn't had much sleep these past three nights, but he wasn't tired either.

The stampeding of the peaches had been the high point in the whole of his young life. He was sorely disappointed that with the climax still to come, the arrival of Travis and the great A.J. Dunit, he had been sent home with the two Mexicans. When he got older that wouldn't happen. When he became older no one would ever send him home.

His small bright eyes focused far across the winding ribbon of river in the direction of Barbacomori Creek and the broken peach orchard. He was searching for riders, any riders. He hoped it would be Bowie riding out of there and not A.J. Dunit. He felt scared, though. Everyone knew A.J. Dunit. He ate little boys' ears, they said at school. In his mind Travis was already dead.

Was that a rider over there? His heart strained against the cage of his chest. A rider with two horses behind him? Could be. His vivid imagination saw Bowie, craggy, rough-hewn as Apache rock, sitting giant-tall in the saddle riding silently ahead. Behind him, strapped to their horses, blood

dripping off their fingertips into the earth, A.J. Dunit, the greatest killer in the West, shot cleanly between the eyes, and Travis Malabar, unfortunate brother of Bowie, whom Bowie had been forced to kill in self-defense.

Mica scrambled down from the rocky promontory as fast as he could. He mounted the big roan gelding Bowie had given him and spurred furiously toward the river. By angling in that direction he could intersect the rider's course before he reached town.

Who was it? Who? It beat like thunder inside his breast.

He forded the river and broke his gleaming, dripping mount out of the shadows of the cottonwoods and sycamores into the bright light of the grasslands. The figure of the rider was getting larger. A small pulse was throbbing in Mica's throat. He was right. Dimly discernible on the horses behind him were dark, bedroll shapes that were larger than bedrolls. They could be only one thing.

Mica slowed down. He was scared now. That rider didn't look tall enough to be Bowie. That horse didn't look like Bowie's either. He would have sworn Bowie's horse was the last one in line, but he was still not close enough to be sure.

Slowly now, he rode parallel to the rider. Suddenly, he was reluctant to approach any nearer. A terrible fear chattered in his teeth. Tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He wiped them away fiercely. "Chicken!" he swore at himself. "Big Paddy chicken!"

He spurred his horse at a gallop toward the slow moving rider, the gelding eating up the distance between them in great grass-spurting strides.

He stopped twenty-five yards away. Yes, it was Travis! The rider was Travis! Behind him, tied down on the first horse, his arms hanging down one side, his legs the other, was A.J. Dunit. On the second horse was—Bowie.

Bowie! A knot gorged in Mica's throat so big he couldn't swallow.

Travis had halted and was glaring at him out of dusty, red-rimmed eyes. "Go home, Mica," he said loudly.

"B—Bowie," Mica started.

"I said, go home, boy! Get out of here! Get out now!"

Mica wheeled his horse and sprinted for the river. The wind swept the tears back, stinging his cheeks. Bowie dead! Bowie dead! Bowie, who had given him this horse, who had taught him to rope and shoot, who had given him his first real gun.

At the river he stopped. He could hardly catch his breath. He wiped the weakness from his face and eyes.

What had happened? Had Travis killed them both? Impossible. He blew his nose over the side of his horse. Had Bowie and A.J. killed each other? That seemed possible. The two greatest shooting it out. Both so fast they couldn't lose, or win either. He rubbed his wrist back and forth rapidly across his eyes. But had it happened like that? He turned and watched Travis heading for town. He blew his nose again, more calmly.

He'd decided what he would do now. He swung his horse in among the trees along the river. Carefully he began to trail Travis. He saw Travis pause several times to lift a bottle from his saddlebag and drink deeply of it. As they neared town, Mica left the cover of trees and drew in behind the three-horse column. Travis didn't look back. He didn't even look to either side now.

The thunk of the stamp mill drummed in their ears as they crossed the wooden bridge and plodded slowly down the single, treeless street of Charleston. Men and women came to the windows of stores and houses to stare out at the strange procession.

Other men, miners, cowhands, gamblers, slipped cautiously out of the saloons to stand quietly in small

groups and watch as Travis moved down the street toward the livery stable.

At the livery stable Travis dismounted and went inside. Slowly small knots of men shuffled up to the dead men. They lifted the long black hair hanging over A.J. Dunit's head to look at him, to make sure. They backed off, shaking their heads. They didn't have to look at Bowie like that. They could tell by his size.

Travis came back out. With him he had a team and wagon. Like they were only tiny sacks of grits, he lifted the bodies from the horses and shifted them into the wagon.

The men watched Travis. A small wonder spread across their faces. Imperceptibly it opened some of their mouths.

Men began to smile at him. Some tentatively approached him, called him softly by name. Travis acknowledged none of this.

Stone-faced he drove the wagon to the old lumberyard. He stepped down. Thirty minutes later he was back out with two large fresh-sawed boxes and four short pieces of wood. He put everything on the wagon. He placed Bowie in the larger box, A.J. in the other. He lidded the boxes and drove to the store.

Here he bought three shovels, a hammer, nails, a brush and a can of paint, and issued orders to two Mexicans idling on an empty apple barrel. Then he headed for the rise at the edge of town.

Mica had no heart to follow him there. That was a high place with plain white crosses and a lot of wind. It was a sad place. He waited in town. He listened to the men talk in whispers and low voices. What had happened? No one knew. A.J. Dunit dead, that wild one, that one with the name like a knife, him dead too. Travis was alive. Poor, humble, simple, harmless Travis.



"He couldn't have done it," one said. "They musta killed one another."

"You can't be sure," said another.

"How did it happen?" said a third.

"Why don't you ask him and find out?"

"*You* ask him."

The talk rose and ebbed.

When Travis brought the empty wagon back down from Boot Hill and got his horse at the livery stable he was no longer a figure of fun and scorn among his countrymen. They were all smiling at him, just to be sure. Small boys clustered around his horse in front of Gib Ray's saloon. They scurried away in respect and awe when he came out with a fresh bottle and shoved it into his saddlebag.

Travis mounted. Briefly he glanced at the people lining the old wooden boardwalk. They waited expectantly, smiling, wondering, fearful.

"We figured you wrong, Travis," a man said timidly. "We sure did. Tell us how it happened, Travis. I mean, how you did it," he added quickly.

"Stay and have a drink," another man said. "Gib Ray's buying."

Some men opened their mouths wide to laugh at this, then tightened down on them hastily, then subsided entirely.

Travis backed his horse into the middle of the street. His square, drink-red face hitched sharply. He stared at the people thronging the boardwalk. He swept them all up in one long stabbing glance. He leaned over his horse and spat once into the dirt. Slowly, then, he turned and rode off down the dusty street.

A few moments later Mica sped after the bull bulge of that departing neck. At the corner of the saloon stood three boys Mica knew from school. As he passed the spot

in the street where Travis had spit, Mica tried to spit too. His mouth was bone-dry.

Travis took the river road. He rode slowly, punctuating his journey with several stops to refresh himself from the bottle of whiskey in his saddlebag.

Mica observed him from the backside of the ridge that paralleled the river, trailing him as he had once done with Bowie so very long ago. When Travis stopped, Mica stopped. This time he had no fear of being caught.

The sun dipped low on the rim of the dusky mountains now. It would be almost dark before he got home. He would catch it from his mother but he didn't care. Nothing worse could happen to him today, or any other day, for that matter. Bowie was dead.

Travis rocked unsteadily in the saddle. Mica was wishing, I hope he falls off. If he killed Bowie, I hope he fall off and breaks his neck. I hope he does!

Only when Travis turned into his mother's yard did Mica break from the cover of rocks and gallop toward him. Travis had dismounted and was taking another long drink from the bottle. For a moment he stood wobble-legged and stared through the dusk at the white adobe house. He wiped his lips. Then, erratically, and very slowly, he headed for the house, gripping the almost empty whiskey bottle in one hand. He didn't knock. He pushed open the front door with his knee. He was etched in the doorway a brief instant, then he stepped inside the darkened room. Mica slipped quickly to the open door.

There was absolute silence inside. Then softly, "You!" Then louder, "You?"

"Surprise, Zoanna," Travis said thickly. "Big surprise. I don't suppose you ever expected to see me again. Well, why don't you light the lamp? Isn't good for a woman to sit all alone in a darkened room. Isn't—"

"I don't want it lit!"

"Well, I do!" Mica heard him fumbling around. Heard a dish crash. "Sorry," Travis mumbled. "Sorry, hell!" A gleam of yellow fanned through the room and out on to the porch. "That's better," Travis said, "I can see you now. You don't look so good. You want a drink? I do." The silence was a dark gloom inside until Travis coughed with the whiskey.

"Why don't you ask me about Bowie?" Travis said now. "Why don't you ask me where he is? Don't you want to know?" His voice was getting bigger. "I came to tell you."

The silence inside was chill and dark and it lasted a long time.

"He's dead, Zoanna!" It came with a rush and reverberated hollowly in the low-ceilinged room. "I killed him, Zoanna. I killed him, Zoanna."

"You lie, goddamn you, you lie!"

"Yes, I lie. I didn't kill him. He killed himself. He killed A.J., then he let me shoot him."

There was the fluttery scuff of feet, and then the bigger, harsher sounds of a struggle. "I don't believe you!" his mother cried. "I don't! Damn you!"

Mica rushed through the open door. His mother was pounding Travis' chest. Travis gripped her wrists and shook her. Mica swallowed hard. "Leave her alone," he said.

Travis half-turned to the small intruder. "Get away from here, Mica," he said. "This is between your mother and me."

"It's all right, son," Zoanna said. She wasn't crying but her face was all puffy and he could barely see her eyes. "He's not hurting me. Go outside like he says." He stood there frozen. "Mica, go outside!"

He moved back to the door. "It's true, Mama. He's

dead. Bowie's dead. I seen him." He ran outside so they wouldn't see this terrible feebleness that rose in his eyes. He ran to the back door of the kitchen and entered silently. There in the shadows he crouched and watched.

His mother had fallen into a chair. Her head was lowered. She was shaking as badly as when Travis had laid his hands on her. "Knew it," she said. "Knew it—knew it—"

"Drink this, Zoanna." Travis was tilting the bottle to her mouth, spilling some down her dress. "This medicine cures everything. This sweet brain-chilling medicine." Travis helped himself to a deep draught and set the bottle back on the table.

His hands crawled up and down the sides of his pants. "You and me, Zoanna!" He began to laugh harshly till the whiskey made him cough. "Paw, Bowie, A.J." He pointed a trembling, square-tipped finger at her. "But you and me. We made it, didn't we? Dear God, Zoanna! He loved you and you loved him, and still he didn't kill me." He was silent a long moment. His hands wouldn't remain still. "He died claiming you were a good woman. A good woman!" He grabbed her shoulders and wrenched them viciously. "Look at me! Did you hear that, Zoanna? A good woman."

"Everything I did," Zoanna said, and Mica could hardly hear her, "I did for Mica."

"That's a lie!"

She closed her eyes. "Yes," she said. "That's not altogether true. I loved him, Travis. Only the Lord knows how much."

"And the Lord will judge you, too."

"Knowing it was wrong, I loved him. You'd never understand that, I suppose."

In the kitchen the spooks tingled all over Mica's body.

He was hearing secret things now. Secret things that only grown people spoke about and little boys wondered about. He felt guilty, and scared, and happy too, like the time two years ago he had peeked when his mother undressed.

"You killed him, Zoanna!" Travis said. "You and I killed him."

Zoanna rose stiffly. Contempt narrowed her eyes, tugged down the corners of her mouth. "You're afraid, Travis!" she said. "You've always been afraid, like your father and mother before you. Afraid of not having any respect, afraid of being alone. You've always felt unsafe because you don't have friends and respect. That's the only reason you went after Bowie!"

As quickly as she'd risen she sank back into the chair. "Well, I'm not," she said slackly. "When they hear my Indian bell ringing they won't come. They never would. Now they never will. I can stand up to it." Her head fell forward on her chest. "Go away now, Travis. Please. I can't stand any more today."

Travis' jowls were suffused with blood. "I can't stand any more ever." He took a long gulp of whiskey. "Ever! Ever! Ever!" His face broke completely open. He snatched up a wooden chair and exploded it across his knee. The room showered scraps and splinters. "You should have seen them in town this afternoon! When I came in trailing A.J. and Bowie behind me!" In each hand he gripped a fragment of shattered chair. "I was a hero." He slammed the broken pieces of wood on the floor. "Today, I really knew how Bowie felt. All day I've wanted to strike back at someone, something." He stood there, his massive shoulders hunched forward like a wounded bull set to charge.

"Get out of my house, you drunken fool!"

"When I'm ready." He lurched sideways against the

table, upsetting the whiskey bottle. It fell on the floor but did not break. The last of the liquor spilled out, laying a dark stain on the old jerka rug.

"I loved you, Zoanna," he said. "Yes." He leaned against the table to steady the shakes in his legs. He saw the whiskey bottle on the floor. Slowly, he bent over and picked it up. "I loved you," he said in a voice drained of all emotion, all tone.

"I hate you!" she lashed at him. "Do you hear? I hate you!"

Travis' hand whitened on the neck of the bottle. He brought the bottle down hard against the edge of the table. The bottle fractured halfway down.

He towered over Zoanna. He grasped her by her red hair. He pulled her head down on the table.

"I loved you, Zoanna," he said. He laughed hoarsely, darkly, from deep in his belly. He drove the jagged end of the bottle into her smooth, round face.

Mica burst out of the kitchen into the big room. He flung himself against Travis' back, his small hands tearing, scratching. With the elbow of one arm Travis pushed him away hard. Mica fell to the floor against his own bed. Momentarily the breath was knocked out of him. There was blood gushing all over his mother's face. She'd gone limp, completely dead in Travis' grasp. Her face, patient, passive, just hung there, on the edge of the table, the eyes full of white, staring up sightlessly at the ceiling.

Wildly Mica's shivering glance skittered about the room. On the wall above his bed was the old gun Bowie had given him. With one bullet in it in case of Indians.

Floundering for each short, grating breath, he crawled onto the bed. His small hands shook as he reached for the holstered gun. It was heavy, never had it been so heavy. He held it in both hands. He pointed it at Travis' broad back. His fingers moved along the trigger.

He couldn't shoot him in the back, he couldn't. He remembered what Bowie had said about shooting a man in the back.

"Travis!" he screamed at the top of his bursting lungs. "Travis! Stop hurting my Mama! Travis! I'm going to kill you. Turn around, Travis! Please, Travis!"

Slowly, his terrible task completed, his savage anger spent, Travis dropped the jagged bottle onto the floor. He let loose of Zoanna's hair. She rolled off the table, sliding heavily into the whiskey and blood staining the rug.

"Stop your yelling, boy," Travis said. "Your mother's going to live. I just marked her. For Bowie. For me. For all of us."

He turned unsteadily toward the boy, his hands hanging redly at his sides.

"Draw, Travis!" Mica shouted and pulled the trigger.

Travis jarred backward, spread his feet fighting for balance. A neat dark hole sprouted in the middle of his shirt. It turned red.

"Mica!" he whispered. "Boy!" Falteringly he edged a step forward. He hung there in mid-air, then fell on his face into the bed.

Mica sprang over him and raced for a towel. On his knees he laid it against his mother's face. She took it and held it there as he helped her to her feet. He brought another towel. Over it she looked at the man lying across the bed. "Did you shoot him, Mica?" Her voice was small and smothered in the reddening towel.

"Yes, Mama." He was shaking all over.

"Is he dead?"

"I think so."

She began to retch. Steadily, violently.

"I'll fetch the doctor, Mama! I'll go right now!"

Appolonio and Julio came sprinting from the bunkhouse. Their faces were white in the light from the lamp.

"Take care of Mama," he ordered shrilly, but very firmly. "Get towels and hot water. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He rode as fast as he could. The first stars were out. There would be half a moon. The air was clean and dry and a good breeze fanned his hot cheeks. He was still trembling, still alive with goose pimples. He had avenged Bowie. He had avenged his mother. He had killed a man. What would they say at school about *that*? He shivered and laughed.

He dug his heels against the gelding's flanks. His mother wouldn't die. She couldn't die. He was Wild Bill Hickok; he was Wes Hardin; he was Doc Holliday. He was a man among men. Tomorrow, when the sun rose again over this valley, there would be one notch on his gun. Who could tell how many notches there'd be before he was as old as Bowie? He laughed till he cried. He didn't care. This was no longer the water of weakness.

He leaned forward into the night wind, his tallow hair hunched low against the roan's dark whipping mane. "Someday," he whispered, "someday . . . name like a rock . . ."





















out on a manhunt for Bowie, a quest that spans half a continent and turns a shy, peace-loving youth into a violence-haunted, sin-obsessed man. . . .

ZOA—beautiful, handsome young widow with a child who needs a man since her gambler-husband—who is promised to the sensitive Travis, but finds herself yielding uncontrollably to Bowie's hard-muscled virility. . . .

MICA—her son, a boy in search of a father and a hero, who finds both in a killer, when his mother's emotional weakness plunges him into violence beyond his years. . . .

A. J. DUNNIT—born killer, hired gunman and bounty hunter, a legend of the West in his lifetime—who has his own score to settle with Bowie, and uses Travis as his unsuspecting weapon. . . .

And, finally, BOWIE MALABAR himself—a hard man driven by vengeance, yet a lonely man haunted by remorse. . . . A remorse that draws him back to Tombstone in the dark of night in search of his brother, and strangely betrays him into violating his brother's woman. . . . A remorse that compels him to take over his dead father's orchard land, and battle the cattlemen who threaten to drive him out. . . . A remorse that forces him, finally, to face the gun of the man he least wanted to hurt, yet wronged the most—his own brother.

This is a story of pulse-tingling action, driving to an almost unbearable climax. It is a novel that also explores the deeper complexities of the human heart caught in tragic dilemmas—of father against son, brother against brother, mistress against lover, son against mother—in a primitive world where issues were simpler, but passions flared with an irrevocable violence.

It is a memorable story—told in the brilliant and colorful tradition of A. B. Guthrie's *THESE THOUSAND HILLS* and Alan LeMay's *THE SEARCHERS* and *THE UNFORGIVEN*—that may well become a classic. A classic of the dreams that were reached for, the blood that was spilled, and the love that was spent, in the days of the West's halcyon glory.

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